

# ART

## STATE OF THE ART

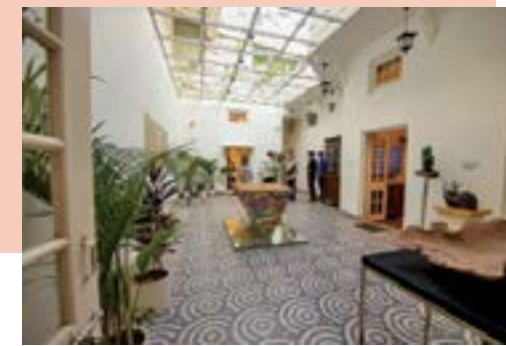
Dhoomimal may be one of Delhi's oldest galleries but, post renovation, nothing about it is out of date



Uday Jain

Established eight decades ago, New Delhi's Dhoomimal Gallery is one of the oldest names in art dealership. For Ram Babu Jain, the gallery's founder, Dhoomimal was first a commercial entity that expanded his printing and publishing business. For his grandson, Uday Jain, the gallery is a venture, but also more. "I have been visiting the gallery since I was 40 days

old!...[I have] spent more time around artists and surrounded with art than at home," he says. Growing up, Jain wanted to be many things—film star, sportscar racer—but at heart he knew art was his destiny. He says in an ideal world, he would have gained more experience by visiting global museums and art fairs, but losing his father when he was nine meant he had to take over the business sooner than planned.



**NEW, IMPROVED**  
The newly-renovated Dhoomimal Gallery's refurbished interiors have specific elements that allow for experiencing contemporary art

stabilised the gallery. It is only now that he felt the need to expand the gallery's portfolio and include early-career artists. For this, Dhoomimal has recently been renovated. The refurbished interiors have specific elements that allow for experiencing contemporary art.

"Connaught Place has colonial architecture. Being a designated heritage zone, there are strict rules about modifications to a building. Therefore, we really could not do much of a structural change" says Jain. Keeping the ethos of the heritage exterior intact, he has managed to achieve a complete overhaul in the look and feel of the space. To achieve the desired contemporary feel, the original windows with their colonial design were opened out, the courtyard was given a Spanish rendition and the walls were kept less ornate.

With a legacy of expertise in moderns, the gallery has recently forayed into the contemporary art space. The idea is to continue to support new talent. Jain says, "My grandfather, with the support of artists like Sailoz Mookherjee and critics like A.S. Raman, encouraged the new talent of the time. Over the years, my father and J. Swaminathan formed one of the best artist-gallerist relationships." When Jain took over in 2003, he says the Indian art world was changing. He then, with a single-minded focus, consolidated and

All this is juxtaposed with remnants of British architecture—the original fireplace, the stairway displaying a pictorial timeline of the history of the gallery. "Moments like Dr Rajendra Prasad's visit and Mrs. Indira Gandhi viewing a Souza show as the sitting prime minister, to Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam enjoying art works are all special."

Against Dhoomimal's traditional architecture, contemporary artworks seem to take on new meaning. Jain says, "Like how at the Kochi Biennale, old shipyards are used to showcase contemporary works and installations, the result is fantastic." Dhoomimal has a robust line-up of young artists to boast of. It is also going to offer an annual scholarship to support exceptional talent. ■

—Rahul Kumar

### ART/ ARCHITECTURE

## A MONUMENTAL FEAT

*By restoring Delhi's Sabz Burj to its former glory, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture has provided us a template for future preservation*

If you crossed the roundabout at the juncture of Delhi's Lodhi Road and Mathura Road a few years ago, your eyes may have dimly registered the unremarkable-looking monument standing there; one among countless old structures that dot the city. Take the same route today and your

sensory experience will be very different: the newly renovated Sabz Burj, its blue-tiled dome gleaming, will catch your eye from some distance away. The identity of the nobleman for whom this octagonal mausoleum was built—probably in the 1530s, during Humayun's reign—is unknown, but there is no longer any question

that the *burj* was an important part of the large necropolis that existed around the Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia dargah.

For the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) team that began work on the renovation a few years ago, the challenges were obvious. Much of the incised plaster patterns on the eight walls (each a different design) had faded or disintegrated, as had some of the striking large medallions with Quranic inscriptions. Previous restorations had created problems: the use of cement, for instance, had led to increased water penetration. The entire set of turquoise-blue tiles on the dome (around 8,000 in number) have now been replaced and fixed with lime mortar, as have a large percentage of the tiles—in four distinct colours—on the

monument's drum or "neck".

As Ratish Nanda, CEO, AKTC, points out, something of this vintage can't magically be restored to exactly what it was hundreds of years ago. A certain degree of conjecturing—rooted in careful studies of Timurid architectural trends and construction methods—is inevitable. Take the *burj*'s sandstone *jaalis* (lattice screens), which no longer existed and were replaced with jarring metal grills—possibly during a period in the early 20th century when the structure was used as a police station. In recreating these *jaalis*, the team didn't know the precise 16th century design but, as Nanda says, the important thing was to restore the integrity of the material originally used and the processes by which the screens were made.

The big discovery during the restoration was the uncovering of what survived of an intricately painted ceiling in the domed chamber—the earliest existing painted ceiling for a Mughal-era structure. Faded though it is in its current form, a decision was made not to tamper with it to make it look "touristy". "We differentiate between craft and art, and have different approaches for them," Nanda says, making it clear that the uncovered ceiling was being

treated as an example of the latter. A reconstruction drawing has been made by the painter Himanish Das, however, and it creates a mental image of now-forgotten artists lying, Michelangelo-like, on their backs as they did this painstaking work.

There is a poignant subtext here: located at a congested roundabout, the Sabz Burj is not the sort of tourist attraction that will draw large crowds the way the nearby Sunder Nursery or Humayun's Tomb do. Relatively few people will step into the interiors and see the remains of the grand ceiling. Many will, however, get to gawp at the beautiful exterior—a reminder that a diligent restoration can make the past feel more real and, well, present. ■

—Jai Arjun Singh

**The AKTC team focused on restoring the integrity of the original materials and processes used in the making of the Sabz Burj**

