

The Art of Faking

Ashoke Nag

THERE'S an undercurrent of concern creeping into art circles about paintings being withdrawn at recent international and domestic auctions of Indian contemporary art. Apparently, these works were dropped because of their questionable background. Insiders put down these withdrawals as cases of fakes. According to art trade watchers, auctioneers may do well to evolve adequate steps to vet the authenticity of works. "News has spread that some paintings were withdrawn at the latest overseas auctions of Indian art because of provenance issues. But one can read into this development as stemming from the surfacing of fakes in the lots on offer. Domestic auctions are also hit by the entry of suspected fakes. So, it's time for auction houses to evolve steps to stamp out fakes, while building the catalogue for an auction," a source told ET.

The source said auction houses will do the trade a favour if they announce such withdrawals officially. To start with, this could be done in the media. Subsequently, the paintings excluded in the run-up to an auction can be mentioned in the next sale catalogue. This will infuse a great deal of transparency in the matter. "People dealing in fakes are taking advantage of the lack of information revolving around fakes and the focus of auctioneers on preserving their reputation," he said. The source added that while overseas auction houses had experts on their panel who specialise in international art, there are hardly any specialists to examine Indian art. In this context, and with Indian art on the upswing, it is relevant to set up an experts' body dedicated to this genre of artworks. The approach to evaluating the genuineness of works can be based on analysis by experts. "Even the provenance of a work is not foolproof. Unfortunately, the provenance of a work can be created as easily as the fakes themselves," he said.

Drawing on lab techniques can be used to verify the authenticity of a painting by an artist who is no more alive. As far as works by living artists go, the painter concerned can be brought to authenticate the works. "Artists are sometimes known to charge a fee for this service, and that's a disincentive for the auctioneer," the source said. An auctioneer or a gallery guarantees refunding a buyer's cash if the work he/she acquires is a fake. All stakeholders should come together to trace the source from where the fake has originated so the faker can be booked. "But most parties are averse to getting involved as criminals fuel this business and the law is not always a protective force," the source said.