



GALLERY WEEKEND KUALA LUMPUR

Pioneering culture-building networks

Guest editor - Shalini Ganendra

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Founding Director of the UNESCO Observatory

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**ABOUT THE
e-JOURNAL**

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

Editorial

Shalini Amerasinghe Ganendra – Guest Editor

BA, MA Hons (Cambridge.), LL.M.

Cultural Leader, Scholar and Founder of
Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

BIOGRAPHY



Shalini Ganendra's impact on cultural development has been defined by over two decades of informed cultural engagement. Through programming, research, publication and an overarching commitment to transnational connection, she has furthered recognition of, inter alia, the distinct and longstanding creative practises of Sri Lanka and Malaysia.

Some notable projects include: Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur with its Luminary Programme featuring international and local creatives in dialogue and presentation, pioneering exhibitions of Sri Lankan modern and contemporary art in Kuala

Lumpur, London and New York, and research with publication on cultural practices.

Shalini is Sri Lankan born. She was educated in the US and UK, graduating secondary from Phillips Exeter Academy where she is a Harkness Fellow, after which she read law at University of Cambridge, Trinity Hall. She obtained an LL.M. from Columbia University Law School and is a qualified Barrister and New York Attorney. She has been awarded Visiting Fellowships by Oxford and Cambridge Universities to further cultural research.

FOREWORD

Culture celebrating difference. Culture complimenting commerce. Pioneering culture – The Story of Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur

Developing appreciation for and bringing greater accessibility to culture as a whole and visual art in particular, has been the foundation on which Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur (GWKL) has developed, over a meteoric five years, reflecting evolution and invention. Culture complimenting commerce. Culture celebrating difference. Culture as the creative. Starting out as a prayer, a dream, GWKL has steadily and organically grown, embracing free participation and access, presenting a dynamic platform of multi-disciplinary content. GWKL has been a mechanism through which Malaysia can reconnect with its own cultural landscape (both traditional and contemporary). The cultural marquee has introduced valuable local culture to global audiences; facilitated global exchange; and bridged cultures and disciplines to deliver engagement and project development. As such, GWKL has critically become about the culture of encounter.

The term ‘gallery weekend’ is somewhat of an anomaly for this marquee because the duration now spans two weeks. This longer period offers the opportunity for guests to participate in all offerings and for cultural stakeholders to derive more value through programme build-up. GWKL remains an immersive and intense cultural experience.

Our goal has been for the long-term development of cultural appreciation (local and global), coupled with the creation of a sustainable and appreciative cultural ecosystem through which audiences develop a greater appreciation for the creative. Such appreciation fostered through talks and viewings inevitably sprouts economic support. As a platform, GWKL complements art fairs and biennials, taking the best features from all such events, and presenting them over a shorter period of time with mainly free programming. Since 2016, GWKL has been supported by a wide array of cultural

stakeholders and endorsed by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Tourism, Arts & Culture. We have partnered with major local museums including the National Art Gallery and Islamic Art Museum Malaysia, in addition to including more than 30 select project spaces, galleries, collection venues and cultural spaces annually.

The GWKL Luminary Programme, consisting of public talks (panel and individual) presented by a diverse range of creative talent, has been the anchor feature of GWKL and has defined the gravitas of the marquee. Over these five years, we have hosted more than 30 Luminaries from over 12 countries, including curators, museum directors, auction experts, artists, journalists and collectors. Twenty-two luminaries, a major foundation participant, one moderator and one observer are represented in this publication.

Their form of contribution, whether through essay, interview or presentation format, provides a vibrant glimpse of the diversity of topics, experience and outlooks presented over the past five years– covering art practise, craft, curation, museology, markets, architecture, design, collecting and more. I thank each of these amazing personalities for their valuable insights; editorial assistant, Yung Lo, for adeptly ordering and coordinating these submissions; and Lindy Joubert, Director of the UNESCO Observatory, for quality endorsement of GWKL.

When GWKL launched in 2016, the Art Newspaper wrote “The next Berlin? Kuala Lumpur launches gallery weekend. Dealers and museums join forces to put the Malaysian capital on the art map.” In fact, GWKL has gone beyond being just another “gallery weekend”. Rather, the connectivity that the marquee offers has enriched many thus far with the promise of growing returns through increased awareness and appreciation. In 2020, the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic propelled us to innovate and deliver what turned out to be one of the most successful Luminary Features virtually, where everyone had a front-row seat. The high attendance was a testament to a growing realisation that culture can be the pivot to recovery. “GWKL continues to pioneer culture-building bridges and networks. It applauds creativity and provides a platform for dynamic discussions that continue long after the event itself closes. Likewise, this UNESCO Observatory ‘Arts in Asia’ publication extends this culture of connectivity for greater reach and duration. GWKL continues to pioneer culture. We hope you enjoy the read.

An interview with Edward Gibbs

Chairman of Middle East and India Department, Sotheby's London

AUTHOR

Yung Lo (BA (Hons), University of Cambridge, through the **Gallery Weekend Kuala Lumpur**, 2020

BIOGRAPHY

Edward Gibbs joined Sotheby's in 2003. He advises private, corporate and institutional collectors across Europe, North Africa, The Middle East, South Asia and throughout the Muslim world. He oversees three major auction categories: Arts of the Islamic World, Art of Imperial India and Contemporary Arab, Iranian and Turkish Art.



Edward's career exemplifies his passion for Islamic Art, which began in 1988 with a visit to Al-Andalus and the Great Mosque of Cordova. Prior to joining Sotheby's, he served for seven years as lecturer in Islamic Art at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, where he set up the innovative Foundation Course in Islamic and Asian Art with Sotheby's Institute of Art.

In 1997, he was invited by the British Council to co-curate the exhibition *Traditions of Respect: Britain & Islamic Cultures* to mark the 50th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan. The exhibition was opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in Lahore and New Delhi.

He was a panellist for GWKL 2020's *Luminary Forum III: Collecting & Curating – Ways of Seeing*.

Both curating and auctioneering involve the ability and necessity to engage an audience; they are both performances in a sense – the latter with obvious showmanship and spectacle, but both involve anticipating an audience’s reaction, judging pace and creating atmosphere. Skills that are needed for both would be empathy, confidence and by extension, intuition; an almost visceral sense of how everything should and will come together.

- Edward Gibbs, Chairman of Middle East and India Department, Sotheby’s London

An interview with Edward Gibbs

Q: What application advice would you give young graduates who want to work in reputable auction houses like Sotheby's, since competition is usually so high? What is Sotheby's looking for usually when assessing an application?

Edward Gibbs: Start as an intern or apply to be a graduate trainee, which at Sotheby's is a 1-year selective programme that trains you in all areas of the business, giving you the opportunity to understand how your interests and skill sets can be best applied as there are a range of specialties in both the art and business side of auction houses. Sotheby's looks for dynamic, intellectually curious applicants who have an aptitude for working in fast paced environments, and of course, have a passion for arts, objects, and an interest in the people who collect them.

Q: Are there any practices in curating that auctioneers adopt in their own practice, and vice versa? They sound like vastly different professions, but are there any unseen similarities, or transferable skills?

EG: Both curating and auctioneering involve the ability and necessity to engage an audience; they are both performances in a sense – the latter with obvious showmanship and spectacle, but both involve anticipating an audience's reaction, judging pace and creating atmosphere. Skills that are needed for both would be empathy, confidence and by extension, intuition; an almost visceral sense of how everything should and will come together.

Of course, there are also marked differences. Curating involves careful study and research of how works speak to each other intellectually or thematically, but this is balanced against the limitations and possibilities of physical placement. In a way, having to juggle these dual approaches is similar to auctioneering. On the podium, you must engage a digital audience, a physical one, field phone bids and also encourage excitement with stylistic performative flare.

Q: What are your responsibilities as the Chairman of the Middle East and India department? Is there ever a cross-collaboration between departments?

EG: I oversee all of our regional activity, which involves our continued engagement with collectors, programming (of exhibitions and educational initiatives) and the success of all of our auctions which span Arts from the Islamic World, Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art and Middle Eastern Art. We are privileged to be able to hold these auctions in London and New York. While being based in London, the department also covers our two regional offices in Mumbai and Dubai.

There are synergies and cross-collaboration between all of our art specialties and regional activity which is what makes them so successful – breaking down ‘silos’ has almost become a company motto. It has become even more obvious that collectors have diverse interests and consider multiple locations as homes and it is in these intersections that we can create new concepts, be it cross-category sales including luxury items, or bringing Old Master paintings to Dubai. We have just recently returned from the U.A.E after taking our two masterworks by Botticelli and Rembrandt to be shared with our local collectors.

Q: Why is Islamic art your choice of specialisation and what have you found most gratifying about this specialisation? Are you interested in Islamic art from a certain period?

EG: My passion for Islamic art began with a trip to Al-Andalus and a visit to the Great Mosque of Córdoba and the Alhambra palace in Granada. This was my first exposure to Islamic art and architecture, and I was overwhelmed by its beauty and sophistication. Inspired to discover more, I immersed myself in the subject through travel, study and archaeological excavations, leading eventually to a teaching post at London University. From there I gravitated to an auction house and have never looked back. My particular area of specialisation is the Mamluk period in Egypt and Syria.

Q: What are your thoughts on contemporary art like the shredded Banksy painting (value has doubled after the act), or the banana taped onto the wall? Will performance art become a part of the future of auction?

EG: As collectors or buyers become more familiar with the range of practices in contemporary art, there is really no limit to what someone may be willing to buy. That said, this is not necessarily a new concept – you need look no further than Marcel Duchamp’s Urinal in 1917. Everything can have a price, it really just depends on how an idea is packaged, and by whom.

Q: Please explain in brief the process for determining estimate values for an artwork that goes on sale at an auction.

EG: The most important factor in evaluating a work of art is expertise. With nearly three centuries of experience, Sotheby's global team of specialists has an unmatched understanding of their fields and the current market. Establishing the value of a work of art, a great jewel, watch or car is determined by a number of factors including rarity, ownership history, historical importance, subject matter and, of course, quality. Scientific analysis also has a part to play, especially in the authentication of an artwork. Sotheby's is especially strong in this area as it has its own in-house high-tech scientific research laboratory run by James Martin of Orion Analytical.

Q: As someone who works in an auction house, what are your personal views on growing private collections that pick up key works? Should art be shared with all or become part of only a narrow viewing?

EG: Art is personal, and so is collecting. Private collectors and patrons have throughout history contributed immeasurably to the advancement, protection and growth of the arts. What we should focus on is how we can contribute to creating an ecosystem that values culturally engaged communities who want to go to well curated museums and institutions – all of which require private and public funding opportunities. If museums are planning exhibitions, we often reach out to clients to inquire about whether they would be interested in loaning particular works – the majority of whom are very keen to support. Many clients acquire works with the hope to turn their collections into private museums with publications. This sense of civic responsibility actually drives many of these key purchases, which the public often doesn't know about.

Q: What are some trends in contemporary Middle East and Indian art right now?

EG: This year we had our first ever online auctions for Modern & Contemporary Middle Eastern art, and we saw a wave of new and younger bidders joining in from the comfort of their own homes. For example, in our October sale, 45% of buyers were new to us, 36% were under 40 years old. We have also been working more closely with the galleries in the Middle East, who form part of the same ecosystem as us, for example with our collaborative 'This Too Shall Pass' auction.

This year we set a record for work by Mohamed Ahmed Ibrahim, and it has been announced will represent the UAE National Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale – which speaks of the growing international interest from institutions and collectors. We also set the auction record for Hassan Sharif (in 2019) and his work is currently on show at Sweden’s Malmö Konsthall – the largest European retrospective on the Emirati artist. Furthermore, our specialists have noted that works with a strong and prestigious provenance do very well – a Bahman Mohassess and Sohrab Sepehri from the former Rockefeller collection for example. More broadly, there seems to be a trend towards modernism and figuration and an appetite for collectors to acquire contemporary paintings, rather than installations and videos which was more prevalent in the late ‘90s early 2000s.

One of the most positive trends we have witnessed recently in the field of Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art is that collectors are looking beyond The Progressive Artists’ Group and embracing new names. In 2020, between our two auctions in New York and London we included a number of artists in our salerooms for the very first time, and collectors responded very enthusiastically, setting new benchmarks for Nareen Nath, Sanat Thaker, S.R. Bhusan, Triloke Kaul, Sunita Shrestha. New World Auction Records were set for Prabhakar Barwe, Nasreen Mohamedi, Mohan Samant, Amarnath Sehgal, PT Reddy, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Pilloo Pochkhanawala.

Q: What are the trends in the auction world right now? Is there a specific type of art that buyers tend to favour these days – for their reselling value and whatnot?

EG: The top categories by value continue to be Contemporary Art, Impressionist & Modern Art, Old Masters and Chinese Works of Art. But we are starting to see increasing demand for luxury items too on the secondary market, partly explained by the increasing trend for sustainability, and buying second hand over brand new. This year we have offered four times the number of luxury sales online compared to last year – over 250 auctions to date!

Q; Would you summarise here the Global Online Auction and its impact on Sotheby’s way of doing business post pandemic?

EG: Challenging times provide opportunities for companies to grow and move ahead of their competitors. We have a team that has proven to be creative, innovative and open to ideas and opportunities.

This is a moment of evolutionary change - a chance to innovate in the interests of our vendors and purchasers. This year we rapidly converted many auctions to online, meaning that we held over 400 online auctions at Sotheby's this year. They together achieved an all-time Industry high of over \$570 million, over three times the volume and over seven times the value for 2019.

Live sales are still an important part of our future, but the online format has worked very well in recent months so we should expect to continue to see many online sales in 2021 too. There is enormous potential here.