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Art imitates life

With an unconventional career choice, SHOBHA SAH, Deputy General Manager, Standard Composite Insurance Brokers Pvt. Ltd, tells SAVIA RAJAGOPAL that she enjoys the challenges of being an art insurance broker

How did you get involved in art insurance?

I started my insurance career way back in 1983, when there was no concept of art insurance in India. I don't know how and when I managed to blend the two interests in my life -- insurance and art. Maybe the first instance was when the Festival of India was held and many Indian artifacts were being sent abroad. Government-owned insurance companies were very hesitant to cover it but I insisted that we (her former company) should go in for it. We insured the entire festival which meant transit insurance for all the artifacts from the National Museum. I remember there was a claim related to a great art treasure called Deedarganj Yakshi. When it came back, the stone sculpture was damaged and to my dismay, the claim remained unsettled. I think that was the turning point.

Art insurance is a very niche segment. What are the challenges in making it a career choice?

Art insurance is different because you need to know about art itself in a very significant way. There are companies dedicated only to art insurance abroad. You need to understand Indian art. When you have in-house expertise, then it's much better. Since I do both these things along with liaisons with experts or historians here, I decided to further augment my knowledge and build expertise.

Do you need formal education to prepare yourself for a career in insuring art?

Actually, I graduated in zoology from MiranPHOTO: PRASHANT NAKVE da House, Delhi, followed by a course in law. Besides this, I'm an associate of the Insurance Institute of India and have participated in many training programmes on specialty insurances like third party insurance, product liability, etc. I've put in 20 years into education. So it's covered a lot of things! I've also done a postgraduate diploma in Indian Aesthetics from Mumbai University and have recently signed up for online art appreciation courses and history of art courses from the University of Oxford.

What does your job entail?

Currently, I am not interacting too much with one-off clients, as I'm the main underwriter of the company. But my job entails structuring products, keeping in mind their specific requirements and the levels of protection they seek. We are the interface between the client and the insurance company.

What is the most expensive piece of art that you have insured?

I've handled the entire Raja Ravi Varma exhibition when it was brought to National Gallery of Modern Art. Each Ravi Varma creation is not less than Rs 1.5 crore. We insure the artwork under transit insurance for the auction house, Sotheby's. I was instrumental in getting Amrita

Shergill's exhibition, which was the only Amrita Shergill exhibition in recent years insured in a private insurance company.

Have you felt any gender bias at any point in time?

Of course not! Women are most definitely involved in art. In fact, there are more women who own art galleries. Besides, there is hardly any competition in this field, as of now.

Art in India does not enjoy mass appeal. What do you attribute it to?

These are questions that have other contexts. Off the cuff, there is no such thing as art education in India. The large public galleries are all government owned which are allocated resources on a miniscule scale that includes funds for acquiring art and maintenance. So there is nothing left for education and general public awareness. It still remains an esoteric thing for the general public. Art education can only be done through citizen initiatives or the media.

Personal favourites

I love works of Anjolie Ela Menon, abstractionist Ram Kumar and Jehangir Sabavala who is a figurative artist.

