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Laying it out: Mukesh Panika surveys the work of artist prior to an exhibition at the Religare Arts gallery

# Art presenters

Curators do a lot to have art appreciated by the public, which is inclined to accept it only when it's packaged such that the displayed artworks conform to a theme, says **Pankaj Mullick**

Curators of yore got away with having heaps of knowledge and little else. They were prone to displaying art works in chronological order (or by art movement) alone. Curating was a side business to being an arts authority.

But times have changed. Ask Mukesh Panika, director, Religare Arts Initiative. Just in terms of skills, the profession requires loads. Research ability, networking and negotiation skills, and a zillion more. A good analogy would be (that of) a film director

who needs to weave everything together to make a great film. According to me, the right sequence (would) be - starting (with) a great 'theme', to the selection of 'right' artist/s; then selection of works by the artist/s so that the works are woven

compactly in the theme," says Panika. Trained as an architect, Panika went on to found an international arts organisation - ArtsAid in New York and curated shows for many years. He now heads the Religare Arts Initiative - a 360 degree platform for the

arts in India that represents and promotes contemporary art through curated shows and programmes, including a residency.

Himanshu Verma, director, Red Earth, a New Delhi-based organisation that engages with visual and performing arts, says, "Curators usually only conceive exhibitions while others organise the event. In my case, I do both because when these two (conceptualising and organising) come together there's a greater sense of intellectual

engagement." Verma is one of the few independent curators on the Indian art scene and has been "able to stay afloat" through passion and innovation. "It pays to be innovative. It's otherwise difficult to get funding from the government but corporates are now more keen to invest in art. However, there aren't that many out there who would respect an idea for its own sake," says Verma. "For a curator, intellectual respect counts for much more than monetary viability," he adds.

One should ask oneself certain questions to ascertain one's commitment to the profession. "Are they passionate enough for the arts so much that when they are struggling, they might not know where the rent will come from? Are they prepared to be self-critical? There's a lot of learn from the people in the arts. Even if you aren't trained, are you willing to learn and be a better curator with every exhibition," asks Verma, who took this route to curating. In 2008, Verma won a special commendation at the International Young Visual Arts Entrepreneur award held in the UK for his entrepreneurial contribution to visual arts in India.

Talking of the more conventional path, Dr Alka Pande, consultant arts advisor and curator, Visual Arts Gallery, India Habitat Centre, says "An academic course is ... the starting point. Reading through a broad spectrum is essential. Cultural studies too are a key segment. An aspiring curator must be curious, must be enlightened and well-rooted in the traditions of the land in which he/she is situated."

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