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Portrait of an artist

From a sweeper at a prints shop in Paris, to the creator of an art movement: we map contemporary artist Shombit Sengupta's incredible journey



DON'T MISS

Sen is ongoing till November 22, 11am to 7pm

ICIA Building, next to Rampart House, K Dubash Marg, Kala Ghoda, Fort

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Born in a refugee camp in Sahid Nagar in Kolkata, contemporary artist Shombit Sengupta (now 62) spent his childhood in poverty. Till the age of 14, he lived in a mud house without electricity or drinking water. Yet, his parents, especially his school teacher mother, encouraged him to follow his dreams. "She used to say, 'Don't let poverty destroy your passion, or your sense of hygiene,'" recalls Sengupta.

Sengupta found inspiration in the artisans and craftsmen in his camp who

made idols and clay pots. He joined the Government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata, but dropped out in the third year to head to Paris. "A lot of my artist friends and mentors eventually settled for the job of a clerk (due to lack of opportunities) and I didn't want to end up like that," says Sengupta.

He felt a connection to France as he was fascinated by the architecture of Chandannagar, a former French colony near Kolkata. His mother sold her bangles to fund the trip, and Sengupta left for Paris on a tourist visa. While it allowed him to stay there for three months, the artist found a job and is now a French national.



THE PARIS DAYS

Sengupta's initial job was of a sweeper at Atelier Gourdon, a lithographic print shop (lithographs are prints made from drawings engraved on stone). Here, he met artists such as Jean Carzou, a French-Armenian artist who illustrated novels by author Ernest Hemingway, and Leonor Fini, an Argentinian surrealist artist. "I imbibed a lot just by watching them work," he says.

Public education being free, after passing an entrance test, Sengupta enrolled himself at art school — the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris (where modern artist Jogen Chowdhury studied) — in 1974. To

Her Trilogy, acrylic on canvas; (left) artist Shombit Sengupta

PHOTOS COURTESY: SHOMBIT SENGUPTA

manage his expenses, he made and sold paintings.

Over the years, he has exhibited at reputed galleries in Kolkata (Academy of Fine Arts, 88 Gallery) and Paris (Polaris Gallery, Musée de l'affiche). He presently shuffles between Kolkata, Bengaluru, and Paris.

EVOLUTION OF ART

In the '90s, Sengupta started devising his own ideology of contemporary painting, which he termed "Gesturism". "We are known by our gestures or movements. Gesturism is a tribute to that," he says. Its characteristics include a depiction of movement in each artwork, spontaneous brushstrokes and bright colours.

It is similar to European styles of Impressionism (depicting the impression of a moment) and Expressionism (a focus on emotions than objects).

His ongoing exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Indian Art, Kala Ghoda, simply titled Sen, features 40 of his recent paintings in acrylic. It also features Désordre, an installation where one his paintings is divided into blocks with a magnetic strip, allowing viewers to play around with the painting.

Despite the European influences, his works retain an Indian aesthetic: a woman wears a maang tikka, and there is an element of chaos inspired by life in India. In his work, he also juxtaposes historical locations with modern sights. For instance, his Ville Enigmatique series features a historic Armenian church in front of a plastic wholesale market in Kolkata; as well as a Baul minstrel in erstwhile French Chandannagar.

His previous exhibition in Mumbai was in 1998 at Jamaat, Colaba. Post the Mumbai exhibition, the works will be displayed at Espace Culturel Marc Jacquet, the cultural centre at Barbizon, France. The city is famous for being home to the Barbizon school of painters who introduced realism in modern art (1830 to 1870).