



ART FOR ALL

Business tycoon Ajay Piramal has an ambitious plan to share his staggering art collection with Mumbai's public, writes **Pavan Lall**

He is best known for having built a real estate and financial services conglomerate. But what's been preoccupying billionaire Ajay Piramal over the last few years has precious little to do with business or market capitalisation. Exactly what? The democratisation of art appreciation. And how? By leveraging building spaces in order to show art for free. "My personal objective is to spend time and effort to set up art exhibitions driven by themes, displayed in accessible spaces and open to people from all strata of society," he says.

In November 2015, the Piramal Museum of Art opened to the public in Mumbai, thereby converting what was one man's hobby into a platform for sharing art with society at large. Spread across the 6,000 sq ft ground floor atrium of Piramal Tower in the city's Lower Parel neighbourhood, it was the first museum of its kind, showcasing works from Piramal's private collection as well as those of other collectors and museums. Just two and a half years later, the concept has proliferated, with artwork from Piramal's vast collection

having found its way into five more locations across the city, driven by the same philosophy.

The new galleries are spread across the city, and are housed in both residential and corporate complexes promoted by the Piramal group. They include the Piramal Museum of Art Byculla Gallery, located at Piramal Aranya; the Piramal Museum of Art Kurla Gallery, located at Piramal Ananta in Agastya Corporate Park in Kurla; two separate galleries planned for Piramal Revanta in Mulund and an upcoming building there; and one in a future project in Mahalaxmi. Artists whose works are displayed are heavyweights: MF Husain, Krishen Khanna, AR Chughtai, VS Gaitonde, SH Raza, FN Souza, Bhupen Khakhar, Jitish Kallat, Nikhil Chopra, Aji VN, KG Subramanyam, Meera Mukherjee and many others.

While the five listed are planned as galleries, Piramal Vaikunth in Thane is also home to the Piramal Art Residency programme. The fully-funded art programme by Piramal Realty encourages young artists to put their easels up for a month in studio spaces that they may not otherwise have access to. The residency also features laundry

services, accommodation, meals and landscaped gardens.

Given his present intent, Piramal can only laugh as he recalls his cavalier attitude to art as a child. When he was younger, he says, "Art classes were the time we would take it easy and fool around." An art teacher would chalk out something on the blackboard and students would copy it as best they could. It wasn't art appreciation or education in the truest sense, one which could help students widen their sensibilities and understand the process and history behind works. The unenlightened attitude he encountered as a child may help explain why his current mission is to see more and more young people across diverse backgrounds access masterworks in spaces that are not restricted to the well-heeled. "One must keep in mind that most artists have come from nothing," he adds.

Historically, government-funded museums have done a less than stellar job of acting as custodians of the country's finest works (though things are changing slowly at some venues). Private ventures can take off faster and exercise better control over the quality of

exhibits, the ambience and, crucially, maintenance. The role of corporate houses in supporting such ventures isn't new. In Kolkata, industrialist Basant Kumar Birla and his wife Sarla, both serious art collectors, established the Birla Academy of Art & Culture in 1967.

But the rise of the private museum has been slow to gather momentum. In 2009, the Dashrath Patel Museum came into being in Alibagh after the idea was proposed by Pinakin Patel, founder of interior design and architecture firm Pinakin Design, and later curated by Dashrath Patel's friend and art critic Sadanand Menon. Anupam Poddar and his mother Lekha Poddar turned over their collection to the Devi Art Foundation, a museum set up in 2008 in Gurugram under their non-profit of the same name. Later, in 2011, the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art opened with an 18,000 sq ft space at a Delhi mall, featuring leading names in 20th-century Indian art.

Other industrialists, including Harsh Goenka and the Jindals of JSW Group, have expressed interest in taking their art collections to the public but their plans are yet to fructify. Sangita Jindal, chairperson of the JSW Foundation, says she's looking for a large facility — between 25,000 and 30,000 sq ft — in Mumbai's historic Ballard Estate and Kala Ghoda areas, hard to come by in a city notorious for being tight on space. Private museums in India are still nascent largely on account of a lack of the right space, says Jindal. Kiran Nadar, founder and chairperson of the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, has also been hard-pressed to find the right venue in New Delhi for a private museum where she would like to showcase works from her 5,000-strong art collection. "My installations are large, and I'd need a 150,000 sq ft facility over a couple of acres of land to present them," she adds. "Land and permissions are an issue right now." Nadar is determined, though, to eventually get her museum up and running even if it means making minor compromises along the way.

Piramal's ambitious project, however, is radically different. "He's taking art to your neighbourhood," says Ashvin Rajagopalan, director of the Piramal Art Foundation, adding that the exhibitions scattered across the city with an ongoing frequency could draw more attention from its own neighbouring ecosystems. At least in some measure, the idea is based on the UK's Tate Museum model, which is one museum structured across four different locations that include the Tate Modern, Tate Britain, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives.

Piramal says more galleries will follow as Piramal Realty continues to develop residential and commercial properties across Mumbai, which have public spaces such as a landing area, lobbies and hall-rooms, as well as show flats. But would it not have been easier to just buy or build a dedicated museum space instead of taking the cluster approach? Rajagopalan says that that would be impractical for two reasons. Buying a building or piece of land in the city centre would run into hundreds of crores of rupees. "Second, any one facility in Mumbai would end up isolating visitors from other zip codes."

Would residents of Nariman Point in Mumbai, for instance, travel an hour and a half to Thanet to see art?

The art fraternity gives the initiative a thumbs-up. Kishore Singh, director of the Delhi Art Gallery, says that the culture of modern museums is being driven by private philanthropy and that this is just the start of what could come in the future. "The outlay for buildings, professionals and the right ambience at the right scale is high, especially when one considers that it's to be created for posterity," Singh says. The costs also include expenditure on licences, legal fees and the salaries of security professionals. "These are huge concerns and Piramal's concept hits the right notes given the size of the spaces, the access to local neighbourhoods and the multiple locations."

Singh also agrees that the very definition of museums across the world is changing as art moves from traditional buildings to unconventional, public venues. In that vein, the Piramal Museum of Art redefines the concept of

works are outstanding and some are perhaps less so," remarks Piramal. Raza is a favourite, as are Souza's cityscapes. Likewise Manjit Bawa, but he stays away from the artist's "lion figures with sharp teeth". Piramal won't buy work that he interprets as macabre or having darker themes, no matter how accomplished or well-known the artist. Bikash Bhattacharya, for instance, was renowned for his depictions of souls in torment, headless men and a series that included prostitutes. The Bhattacharya that Piramal owns is of Kolkata's

Howrah Bridge.

Depth of collection is also something that Piramal takes seriously. For example, he opines that Raza was one of the few prominent modern artists who consistently reinvented himself, from the 1940s up to the 2000s, and Piramal made it a point to collect Raza's that spanned the decades. "We collected work from various turning points in his [Raza's] life that took him to Kashmir, Paris, the Cubist phase he went through and so on," Piramal says. "We

Ajay Piramal on building an art collection

- ▶ Know your provenance: authenticity is everything
- ▶ Go for aesthetics first, return on investment later
- ▶ Good artists also have bad phases: focus on their best
- ▶ Bank on the pros: curators, art historians, gallery directors
- ▶ Dig deep and explore the cycles of an artist's career
- ▶ Buy art with genuine stories behind them

Source: Piramal Art Foundation



what a museum is in context to Mumbai as a city. The Jaya He GVK New Museum at the Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport in Mumbai attempts a similar thing by displaying pieces that range from antiquities to contemporary works.

So where does the artwork for Piramal's multiple locations come from? One avenue is through collaborations, such as the upcoming exhibit of works by S H Raza in association with the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) in Mumbai. But the bulk of it is on loan from Piramal's own private collection, which is estimated to include at least 4,000 paintings, sculptures, installations and art objects and which has been curated by him and his team over the years with a focus on quality backed by personal choice. Piramal himself started collecting art in earnest in 2009, when Nitin Nohria, dean of the Harvard Business School and also his advisor, suggested it as a way to enhance his asset base while sharing something with the community.

What does Piramal look for when collecting art? "I personally don't like certain kinds of art. Some of Husain's

When it opened in 2015, the Piramal Museum of Art (above) was the first of its kind, showcasing works from Piramal's private collection as well as those of other collectors and museums

don't just want to show numbers. The point is to drive themes and show how the art was created and what it was a result of."

How would Piramal guide prospective collectors? He responds that countless wealth managers promote the works of masters as an investment but feels that's the wrong way to do it. "Investment in art appreciates only after 50 years, and in reality is the most illiquid asset for a number of reasons," Piramal says. He lists the reasons why: transaction costs are as high as 20-30 per cent in commissions that intermediaries want for the transaction; a ready buyer may not be available when you want to sell; and acquiring serious pieces by serious artists calls for a serious budget. Despite all these factors, Piramal acknowledges that art is the only high-value object that can be shared and enjoyed in public spaces by many more than just the creator and the owner. As he says, "You just can't do that with jewellery or diamonds."

