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PICASSO, VAN GOGH ART IN ONLINE AUCTION IN INDIA

By Neelam Raaj TNN

NEW DELHI: Indians have always loved phoren brands but when it comes to art, they have shown a preference for homegrown artists. That looks to change as an Indian auction house announced the first-ever sale of western art which will include names like Van Gogh and Picasso. The Van Gogh landscape "L'Allee aux deux promeneurs" and the 1953 Picasso oil "Le Transformateur" are highlights of a Saffronart online auction in February. Even at the India Art Fair that opened in the capital on Thursday, Husain hung with Damien Hirst and Tyeb Mehta with Tracey Emin. One of the first items to be snapped during the VIP preview was a gold skull by Hirst, a controversial British artist whose blingy and bright works seemed suited to Indian tastes.

Besides Hirst, the fair has a slew of international artists like Antony Gormley, Lucian Freud and Mark Quinn. This is also the first time top-tier galleries like White Cube, Hauser & Wirth and Contigua have travelled to Delhi. The fair also attracted several international collectors. The entry of Guy Ullens, the Belgian foodstuffs baron who has a huge collection of Chinese contemporary art, created quite a stir. Bangladesh-based couple Nadia and Rajeeb Samdani went on a shopping spree, picking up Rashid Rana, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and a young contemporary artist. "The Indian art fair now rivals the Frieze," said Nadia. That might be a trifle optimistic but there was no doubting that the mela had become a place of serious business. "Art is an important part of India's growth story," said Neha Kirpal, the young organizer of the IAF.

Many Indian galleries showcased international artists as well. Volte had Johannesburg-based William Kentridge while Sakshi showed British artists Julian Opie and Anish Kapoor and African artist El Anatsui. "We eat foreign food, read international authors so why restrict ourselves when it comes to art? The bottomline is that the work should be good," said Geetha Mehra of Sakshi gallery.

But doesn't the price tag of a big international name - the Van Gogh estimate is \$1 million - appear daunting to Indian collectors? Nish Bhutani, COO of Saffronart, said the estimates had surprised many who attended the preview. "There were people who walked up to me and said they didn't know that one could buy a Dali at such a price."