Gulf war disrupts art routes, but India market remains resilient

Galleries rethink Art Dubai participation, while strong domestic demand cushions impact

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"We made the considered decision to withdraw from Art Dubai," says Bhavna Kakar, founder and director of Latitude 28, a New Delhi-based gallery. "While the ethos of the art world is that the show must go on, it cannot come at the expense of safety."

Kakar's decision reflects the unease rippling through the art world, which is beginning to feel the impact of the war in West Asia, though the domestic market remains robust. "When a calamity hits mankind, all industries get impacted, and art is no different," says Sunaina Anand, founder and director, Art Alive Gallery, Delhi, pointing to the deeply interconnected nature of today's art world.

Art Dubai, scheduled from April 17 to 19 and marking its 20th year, was expected to see a strong Indian presence. Last year, 11 Indian galleries had showcased around 30 artists across genres. This year, however, caution is keeping many of them away. Kakar's gallery had planned a two-person presentation with Gopa Trivedi and Sanket Viramgami, both of whom were scheduled to travel. That plan has now been shelved. "There is little appetite for uncertainty or the risk of being stranded," she says. A summer exhibition her gallery had planned in London has also been deferred.

Richa Agarwal, chairperson, Kolkata Centre for Creativity, and CEO, Emami Art, echoes the sentiment. "... we were scheduled to visit Art Dubai, which has now been disrupted," she says, expressing concern that such interruptions may also influence their international outreach in the near term.

Even as uncertainty clouds international participation, particularly in West Asia, which is a growing hub for Indian art, voices across the sector point to a more layered impact.

AstaGuru's ShowKeen exhibition at Bikaner House, New Delhi, held on March 14-15

Domestic canvas

"The impact of ongoing geopolitical conflicts on the Indian art market has been more nuanced than disruptive," says Ashish Anand, CEO and MD, DAG (formerly Delhi Art Gallery), explaining that India's art ecosystem today is far more domestically anchored than in previous cycles. Manoj Mansukhani, director of marketing at the Mumbai-based AstaGuru Auction House, offers an even more optimistic view. "Even during the pandemic, the market not only remained stable but witnessed significant growth," he says. In his assessment, current geopolitical tensions are "unlikely to have a substantial impact", given the strength of domestic demand and a growing base of engaged collectors.

"However, there has been a discernible slowdown in interest from certain international regions, which is both expected and understandable," says Kakar. She has also witnessed a "noticeable shift" among their collector base – particularly expatriates in the region – many of whom have chosen to relocate temporarily. "A number of South Asian collectors who frequently move between the United Arab Emirates and their home countries have returned."

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A prolonged conflict, says Agarwal, could lead to a broader ripple effect over the coming weeks, though currently she has not witnessed any direct impact. The fact that today, the largest market for Indian art is India itself is helping it keep protected.

"Over the past decade, the centre of gravity has shifted back to t market, driven by the expansion of Indian private wealth, stronger institutional collecting, and the maturation of local galleries, auction houses, and art fairs," says Ashish Anand. "High-value pre-modern and modern Indian art transactions, in particular, are now predominantly anchored within India."

However, as Sunaina Anand points out, "In the past few years, West Asia has been rising as an important art centre... With the war breaking out, this has all come to a situation of disarray and projects have been put on hold."

Travel, she adds, has become "an obstacle", with "an element of fear and uncertainty" affecting participation in international events.

Kakar describes the impact as "direct but tangible", explaining that "conflicts are inherently inflationary — fuel prices rise, international travel becomes more expensive, and shipping costs escalate". All of this, she adds, affects the global movement of art, which is central to exhibitions, fairs, and cross-border collaborations. "While India remains somewhat insulated, there will inevitably be a gradual trickle-down effect."

Proof of the pudding

Agarwal says while there are early indications that collectors from certain geographies are adopting a more cautious approach, "we have not yet observed a significant slowdown in the contemporary segment, where enquiries remain steady".

Auction results offer evidence of resilience. Ashish Anand highlights "The Fine Art Sale" by Mumbai-based auction house Pundole's on March 12. "With an impressive 98.6 per cent sell-through rate and a remarkable turnover of ₹112 crore ($12.2 million), this auction marked a 186 per cent positive deviation from its estimated value," he says.

What also works in the market's favour is that India remains structurally under-invested in art, with only a very small proportion of private wealth allocated to cultural assets, he adds. "When viewed against global benchmarks — and especially in comparison with China — the scale of the opportunity becomes evident."

An exhibition of modern and contemporary Indian art by AstaGuru, titled ShowKeen, at Bikaner House in Delhi on March 14 and 15 gave a glimpse into the market sentiment. Of the 90 works on display, many found buyers, though AstaGuru did not reveal the exact number of works that were sold. Mansukhia simply says that it saw "strong interest from both seasoned and new collectors," pointing to an expanding and diversifying buyer base.

Looking ahead, the mood is one of measured optimism. Kakar describes the outlook as "decidedly strong"; Agarwal calls it "cautiously optimistic"; and Mansukhania points to "continued growth".

In May, India will return to the Venice Biennale with a national pavilion after a seven-year gap. The Kiran Nadar Museum of Art and several independent artists will also register their presence. Other than this, artists such as Shilpa Gupta will keep the country on the global art map with solo shows. So, as Kakar puts it, despite geopolitical uncertainties, the global art conversation will continue to move forward.

Policy engine powers India-UK academic ties: British Council CEO

Nine UK universities approved; 15 in sight

AUHONA MUKHERJEE
New Delhi, 18 March

BOTH INDIA AND THE UK WILL BENEFIT FROM STABILITY IN AN UNSTABLE WORLD, SAID BRITISH COUNCIL CEO SCOTT MCDONALD

Collaboration between India and the United Kingdom (UK) in international education and student mobility is accelerating at an unprecedented pace following the signing of the India-UK free-trade agreement and recent policy reforms in India, said Scott McDonald, chief executive officer of British Council.

With nine UK universities receiving approval to establish operations in India over the past year, the number is expected to rise to 15 in the near future. "We've seen nine UK universities set up here in India in just one year. I've never seen anything this fast or focused, and we believe there will be 15 very soon," McDonald said.

In 2023, the University Grants Commission (UGC) notified regulations allowing foreign universities ranked among the world's top institutions to establish campuses in India and offer undergraduate, postgraduate, and research programmes, subject to regulator approval.

Alison Barrett, country director for India at British Council, added that with India positioning itself as a hub for education, the UK enjoys a first-mover advantage in delivering high-quality university education.

The India-UK corridor remains resilient amid geopolitical tensions, McDonald said, referencing the escalating conflicts in West Asia.

"Your goal as a country, whether the UK or India, is to be stable so you attract more people through all periods. Both of us are currently stable, and we'll work hard on both sides to maintain that stability, and we'll benefit from it in an unstable world," he added.

Under the India–UK Vision 2035, the two countries have committed to expanding educational cooperation, including encouraging UK universities to establish campuses in India, promoting joint and dual degree programmes, and strengthening mutual recognition of qualifications. Of the nine UK universities that have announced plans to establish campuses in India under the UGC's 2023 regulations, only the University of Southampton has begun operations, with the others expected to launch between 2026 and 2027.

"Opportunities in the UK remain very attractive for Indian students, and studying there can also open the door to work opportunities in other countries," Barrett said.

The two countries are also exploring collaboration in skilling and vocational training, with further policy discussions planned, McDonald observed.

Earlier this week, British Council signed a memorandum of understanding with an initiative backed by Smriti Irani under the Alliance for Global Good — Gender Equity and Equality to support around 100,000 women entrepreneurs in India by providing training in English, communication, and digital skills to help them scale their businesses.

"India places a lot of importance on skilling because of its vast employment challenge, but the UK faces a similar challenge. We're exploring the right mix of university and vocational training and how to design these systems effectively," he added. India has increasingly prioritised skill development through initiatives such as the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana and the Skill India Mission, which aim to expand vocational training and certification, improve workforce participation, and address employment gaps.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is having a growing impact on education, and policy changes must account for its effects on academics, skilling, and employment, McDonald added.