

# FEMINA

## Artfully Fortified

*Sangeeta Juneja fulfilled her passion of making contemporary art available to connoisseurs with the Art Chill Gallery inside Amer Fort, Jaipur. But realizing this dream involved overcoming several challenges, including taking on the state government. By Sahar Zaman.*



**SANGEETA JUNEJA, DIRECTOR, GALLERY ART CHILL**

“Lobby number 8, attend to lobby number 8!” A voice crackles on the public address system. The unlikeliness of such an announcement at a heritage fort transports you somewhere else; like a train station or an airport perhaps. Maybe a whole day’s walk in the baking sun, stone and sand of royal Rajasthan has created this aural mirage. But Gallery Art Chill inside Jaipur’s world famous Amer Fort is for real. This is where Sangeeta Juneja, the founder of this unique concept gallery, can be seen instructing her staff manning the two parallel fort corridors complete with arches and jharokas. Although art and Rajasthan’s royal heritage have never been apart, Sangeeta’s gallery is different. Here you will not witness the staple art of the state i.e. Rajasthani miniature paintings. Instead, you can feast your eyes on sculptures and canvases that represent the best of contemporary art created by Indian artists.

But what makes this gallery stand apart is its curious backdrop of history and romance. For it is believed that it was at Amer where Princess Jodhabai was married to the great Akbar, a moment of no mean historical and cultural significance as their union led to a new style of architecture and miniature paintings that married Rajput motifs with a Mughal sense of drama.

The gallery is part of the west wing of Amer Fort and covers an area of 4700 square feet. During the tourist season it has seen a record foot fall of about 5600 in a day, which is probably comparable to a once-in-a-year sort of event such as the India Art Fair held annually in Delhi. Most gallery spaces because

of their elitist tag do not register such a turnover which gives Art Chill a clear edge over them. “It’s a tourist spot, so I get visitors of all sorts. Not just serious buyers but 5-star foreign tourists, backpackers, domestic tourists, people who live here in Amer, art college students, children from school trips, art historians and even visiting dignitaries and heads of state. I’ve had members of the royal families of UAE, Monaco and Jordan to name a few.”



***BEFORE AND AFTER THE CLEAN UP OUTSIDE THE GALLERY IN THE WEST WING OF AMER FORT***

However Art Chill’s success didn’t come easy. The space was shut down and her license revoked because of political reasons. So Sangeeta had to take the matter to court. “When the former Chief Minister Vasundhara Raje decided to restore the west wing of Amer Fort in 2007, she especially chose me to start an art gallery here because I already had a good track record of running my other gallery called Juneja Art in Jaipur for the past two decades. So, I had a series of meetings with her to ensure that a gallery which promotes contemporary artists from Rajasthan and India would be a great idea,” she says. Her collection includes old masters like A. R. Chughtai, Jamini Roy, K. K. Hebber and contemporary artists such as Akbar Padamsee, Paritosh Sen, P. N. Choyal.

“If you see the ‘before’ and ‘after’ pictures of the gallery, you will realize that this place was a dump, a victim of encroachments. There was a carpet factory running from here. But after renovation in 2007, all was going very well with the gallery till the day Salman Khan came to shoot ‘Veer’ in 2009. Because it was during his shoot that one of the walls of the fort collapsed,” says Sangeeta. “The entire fort was shut down for a while and that’s when the trouble started. When the current Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot’s government re-opened the fort and the shops inside, they revoked my license on very flimsy grounds. They said the paintings in my gallery distract tourists from the beauty of the fort.”

As a result her gallery remained shut for almost one and a half years. Each time she had to go check the condition of the works hanging inside, she required special permission by the authorities. That’s when she decided to fight a court case against the government. “It was a very traumatic time for me. And the young

artists whom I had been promoting also suffered because their works were stuck.” She was threatened to back out but Sangeeta decided to keep going. Eventually, the verdict by the Rajasthan High Court swung in her favour. It stated that if a painting is a handmade product, it is considered handicraft and the gallery should be allowed to run because it’s a place that would ultimately benefit the artists.

In July 2011, Sangeeta was re-issued her license. “I feel I was made a victim by this ‘laddoo sarkar’ (spineless government) because they wanted to get back at their predecessor. Besides it made no sense financially speaking... because for every work sold from inside the Fort an official cut of 15 percent goes to the government. So I fail to understand what was their logic in shutting down my place to begin with.”

Today to keep her gallery running she has to ensure an annual turnover of at least Rs 1.5 crore. This requires her to be on her toes day in and day out as the gallery is open every day of the year. To any visitor to her gallery it is amply clear that it is a labour of love. Especially when setting up a gallery in a heritage structure had its own challenges. For example the rules prohibit putting nails in the walls. This was overcome by installing a steel channel running across the ceiling for hanging the paintings. Then what look like walls of the gallery are actually wood board sheets covering the original walls. The original floor is first layered with plastic sheets and then laid with wooden tiles.



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After successfully running two art galleries one would think Sangeeta would be happily resting on her laurels. But the lady is not satisfied. “My latest role is being an art consultant for Le Meridien Hotel in Jaipur. I run a special programme with them called Art Corridor where works from my collection are sent to be displayed at the hotel. Their guests are informed about the show and given a walk across the corridor, giving them a taste of India’s rich and emerging contemporary art about which many know little.”

Not many who come to her gallery know that Sangeeta herself is a trained painter whose art took a backseat when her galleries took off. But her artists are like her family where she’s the protective mom!

***Sahar Zaman is an independent arts journalist, newscaster and curator .***