

## From frames to fame

Tucked away on the first floor above Jehangir Art Gallery in Kalaghoda is the atypical Chemould Art Gallery. A spirited nook-extension of what was the first creative crucible of frame making in India -- Chemould Frames, located in Princess Street in Mumbai. Started by Kekoo Gandhi in 1941, the pioneer shop marks his affair with art, one that has grown into a timeless legacy.

"My father started out, making simple, wooden mouldings for paintings of artists," says Shireen Gandhi, owner Chemould Art Gallery. "Subsequently he met Walter Langhammer, an Austrian painter who left his country during the Nazi occupation of World War II." It was Langhammer who educated Kekoo Gandhi in the intricacies of frame making and brought him in contact with the greats of Indian Progressive Art movement, like Ara, SH Raza and MF Husain. Admitting to his then modest knowledge of art, Kekoo says, "I can't say that I was interested in art to begin with, but I got interested in art through my friend Langhammer, after seeing his great enthusiasm for contemporary art. I felt I had a distinctive role to play and a vested interest in framing the artworks of artists. I had a vested interest in seeing a picture transformed by a frame when it would stand a better chance of finding a buyer. It gave me great satisfaction to be part of the process that sold paintings."

Art was hardly a lucrative market those days, and the painters being low on cash, many a times, left their paintings at Chemould Frames, trusting Kekoo's frame making skills completely. The growing demand for Chemould mouldings made Kekoo Gandhi convert his father's godown in Princess Street into the premier Chemould Frames. And at a time when the city was bereft of venues for showcasing modernist art, the shop became a vantage hangout for budding artists and even morphed into a site for tiny, solo exhibitions for painters, like for M. F. Husain in 1951.

What had started out as a wooden frame making service for prisoners of War that found their way from Europe to India, grew into a full fledged business. And twenty years later, the Chemould Art Gallery was born in 1963 as a sustained metaphor of the Gandhi's tryst with art. "But frame making continued to be a consuming pre occupation for my father," says Shireen, who adeptly manages the reins at the Gallery. "I can't say that it was an obsession because it was hardly a money making domain," she adds honestly. Today Kekoo Gandhi has handed over the reins of his passionate foray to his son Adil and daughter Shireen.

How has the changing landscape in manufacturing mouldings for paintings affected the business? Says Adil Gandhi who takes care of the manufacturing unit in Vasai, and the frames shop, "I am actually guilty of being unable to carry my father's legacy forward. The advent of plastic, fibre and cheaper imports has virtually killed our manufacturing unit that specializes in wooden frames. Though we offer a distinctive edge in terms of quality and finish, the less expensive options in aluminium and fibre glass offer tough and almost unbeatable competition. We can't even match the prices," he rues. "Whereas earlier artists like Raza and Husain used to frequent the shop, apart from buying frames, today the artists mainly buy the wooden strips from us to get their paintings lined, the traditional frames have hardly any takers," says Adil.

Gone are the days of yore. The complexities of Mumbai traffic, the vehicle parking vendetta, the humdrum of city life and the sheer location of the shop in one of the busiest patches in the city make it impossible for old-timers to come in themselves for their requirements. Clients like Maureen Wadia, Tina Ambani, Parmeshwar Godrej

have their personnel pick up the material as and when required. A change that has robbed the shop of its old charm -- that lay in the bond it shared with artists and art lovers.

"I'm 60 and my children are settled abroad. So there is no hope of this business seeping through the next generation," sighs Adil. But doesn't every business require to be infused with a fresh lease of life through reinvention? " The price undercutting makes it a dismal scenario, truly," retorts Adil. A fact evident in the rapidly ceasing production of unusual Chemould frames. Truly, the art of living well and the art of survival are certainly ones to perfect in competitive climes.