

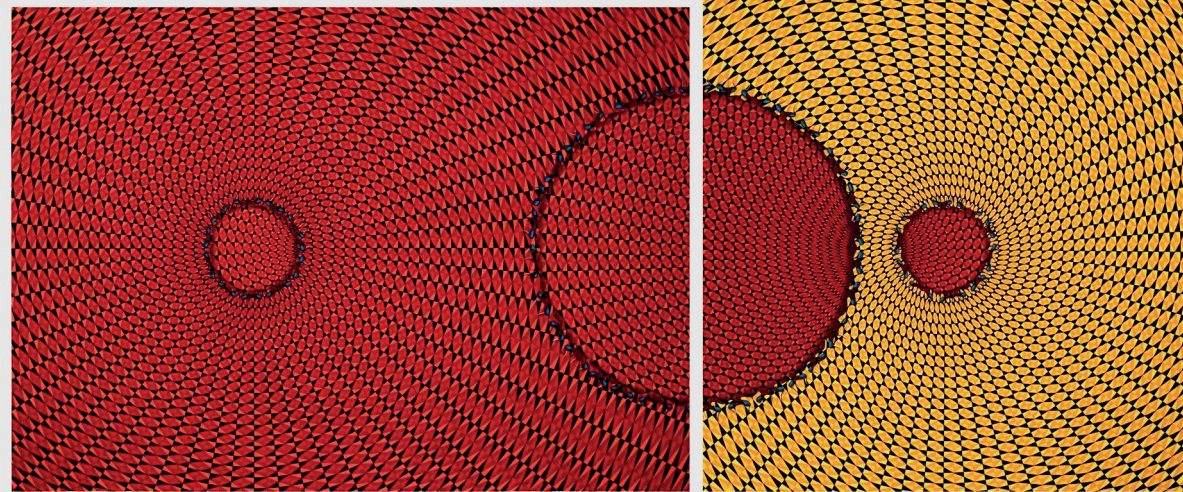
The Collector's Gaze

The personal collections of three gallerists and curators are love letters to niche Indian art forms.

BY SAUMYAA VOHRA

Art historian Kavita Singh once said, “Collectors are custodians of culture.” There is no greater proof of this sentiment than these three incredible gallerists and curators, each of whose personal collections is a love letter to a niche Indian art form. They know its history, its intricacies, the generations of stories woven through the canvases that display them. They are inextricably linked to these forms, with a sharp understanding of where they come from and where they are going. And more importantly, they care about them very deeply. For Pooja Singhal, the form that fascinates her is Pichvai—intricate

cloth paintings that originated in Nathdwara, Rajasthan over 400 years ago. These are visual tales from Lord Krishna's life. It was the honesty and tribal traditions of indigenous folk art that sired the personal collection of Mandiraa Lambba, Co-Founder of Blueprint12. As for Mamta Singhania, Founder-Director of Anant Art Gallery, the wealth of contemporary miniatures she has accumulated will never be too much for her comfort. We uncover exactly how their collections found their start, the pieces that speak to them, and what drives them to nurture the art form through their own collections and galleries.



At the Circle's Centre by Aisha Khalid

IMAGES: COURTESY ANANT ART GALLERY; PICHVAI TRADITION AND BEYOND; AND BLUEPRINT12

Mamta Singhania

Founder-Director, Anant Art Gallery

A number of museum visits peppered Mamta Singhania's adolescence. But the real spark for collecting, she recalls, came later, when she was studying in the US. “Visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston opened up entirely new ways of seeing. The scale, diversity, and freshness of the works made me reflect on what it means to live with art, and that reflection gradually became a calling to collect.”

The piece that began the collection was a canvas painting by Indian painter and lithographer Sakti Burman, which Singhania commissioned in the early 1990s. The painting was of three children playing alongside a mythological bird. “It was a scene full of joy, innocence, and playfulness,” Singhania smiles. “Even today, it remains one of my favourites. It was the first time I truly understood how art could hold both emotion and storytelling in a single frame.”

Her early interest in contemporary miniatures was sparked by Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh, whose practices “drew from the miniature tradition in thoughtful and expansive ways.” Then came an appreciation for Imran Qureshi, Aisha Khalid, Muhammad Zeeshan, and Ghulam Mohammed. “Their extraordinary work became a source of deep admiration, each stretching the form in distinctive ways. Among younger artists, Puja Mondal and Laxmipriya stand out.”

Her collection has, over time, grown to a number that Singhania has long lost count of. “I collect by instinct rather than plan.” Her collection includes a significant number of works by artists from the National College of Arts in Lahore, and, increasingly, from the South Asian diaspora. “I'm drawn to works that are intricate and detailed, often with subtle political or social commentary,” she says. “I'm fascinated by recurring themes (for instance, the changing seasons) and I've commissioned artists to explore them.” Singhania is also inspired by the *hashiya*, the decorative margin in manuscript painting. “Traditionally ornamental, contemporary artists now use it as a space to explore political, social, and conceptual ideas in imaginative ways.”

The gallerist is glad that contemporary miniature painting does receive attention and support, both in India and across South Asia. But that said, she would love to see more specialised residencies, deeper scholarship, and critical writing. “At Anant Art, we've published catalogues on all the contemporary miniature artists we've worked with, and those essays have now become valuable reference points in academic circles. I hope more institutions continue to build on that momentum.”

There is little hesitation when she is asked to zero in on a piece in her collection that is particularly personal to her; the Pakistani contemporary visual artist Aisha Khalid's *At the Circle's Centre*. “Khalid's large diptych is especially meaningful to me. Beyond its vibrant yellow and red geometric patterns, it evokes memories of a long-standing friendship with Aisha and Imran [Qureshi] from the early years of working with them.”

Singhania is taken by how the work slowly reveals its layers. “At first glance, it seems purely decorative, but subtle variations in the surface create a quiet rupture, shifting its meaning from ornament to a profound statement.” The piece, she mentions, is also rooted in Sufi philosophy, exploring dualities like love and pain, the physical and metaphysical. “The meditative, repetitive process behind the intricate patterns echoes ‘zikr’, the rhythmic recitation central to Sufi practice. It connects personal memory with philosophical depth, making it especially poignant.”



Mamta Singhania

Pooja Singhal

Founder, Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

What first drew Pooja Singhal to Pichvai art was its layering; the juxtaposition of its myriad elements. “Every part of a Pichvai painting carries intent, from the structure of the composition to the precision of the line, and the way colour shapes the picture.” Singhal began at home, by studying the older works that hung upon her walls. “I recognised the strength of the visual language, shaped by devotion and held with skill. Until then, my exposure had largely been limited to the pieces that passed through our home, so seeing these older works broadened my understanding of what the form could hold.” The vibrance of the colours, the compositions of forms, and the ease with which several compositions coexist within a single work drew her in completely.

Growing up in a home with the constant presence of traditional artisans shaped Singhal’s sense of culture at a nascent stage. “My mother, widely respected in the artistic community, collected traditional art with a discerning eye. Watching her informed the way I look at heritage and craftsmanship, and laid the foundation for my commitment to revival.” Singhal began collecting early, and also worked to revive handloom through her brand Ruh.

Her revival of Pichvai began in 2009, when she started personally commissioning pieces, later transitioning to a research-led approach grounded in historical accuracy and high-quality materials. “My focus has been on restoring technique, preserving intergenerational knowledge and connecting historical craftsmanship with a contemporary language.” A turning point came with the discovery of an old sketchbook, documenting temple iconography, leading her to reinstate sketches and monochromatic studies as a vital part of the tradition.

Her collecting began with contemporary art, but when she tried to locate an authentic Pichvai, she had no luck. It sprung her into creating the well of artists that would become part of her atelier. She spent more and more time in Nathdwara (Rajasthan), nurturing the relationships her mother had cultivated with traders and dealers. “I realised that while the form carried a reservoir of technique, its expression had narrowed. Addressing that became central to my work.”

Her collection started during Covid, when she saw the crisis facing the trader and artist community, after she had just adopted her children. “While much of my attention was at home, I set aside a fund to support

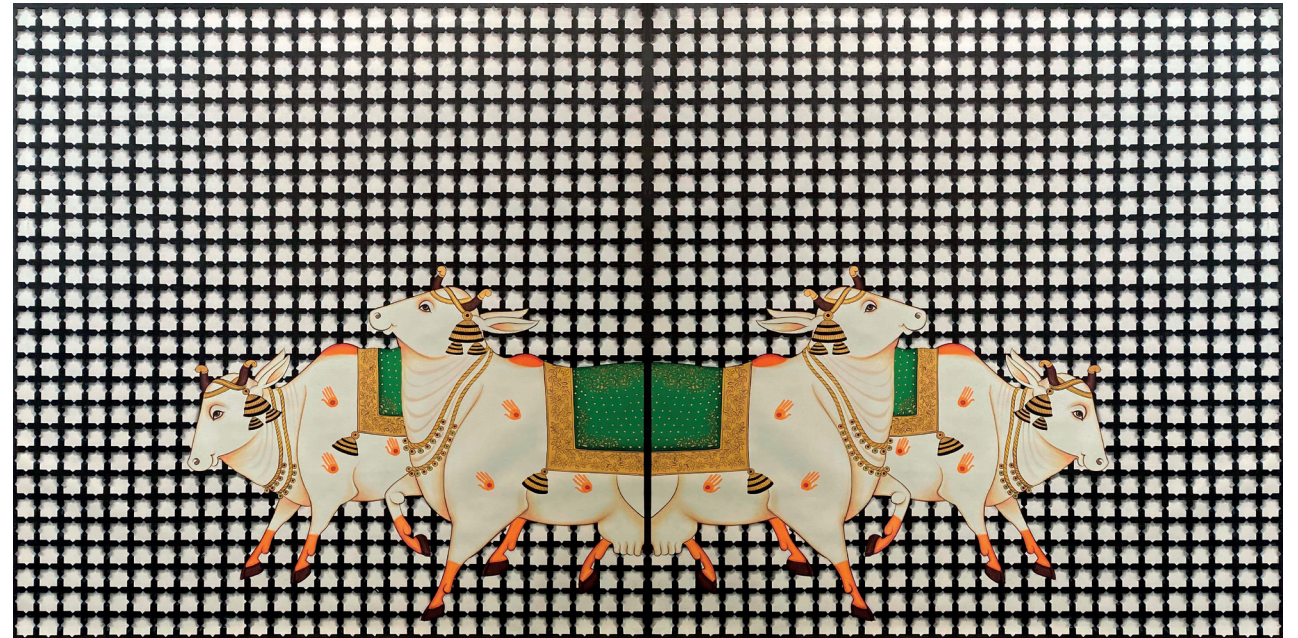
traders and artists who were selling older works from their personal holdings simply to manage their households.” She acquired many of these pieces, and inadvertently built a substantial archive of older Pichvais. At that juncture, Singhal realised that older works beget the origins of the new. “Having them together in one place allows people to see the trajectory of the art form. I acquired a large number of older works, and the collection now stands at roughly 300 pieces of traditional and miniature art.”

Singhal’s work aims to keep modernising Pichvai and its place in the market. “We addressed how the work reached the market, and how it was presented. I brought Pichvai into a contemporary framework by mounting exhibitions to exacting standards and taking them to biennales and fairs. The way the works were hung, framed, and presented had to match, and often surpass, contemporary expectations.” Part of her efforts are also to encourage younger artists to get traditional training, procure funding for the form, position Pichvai within global contemporary art conversations, and make it appealing to the younger collector.

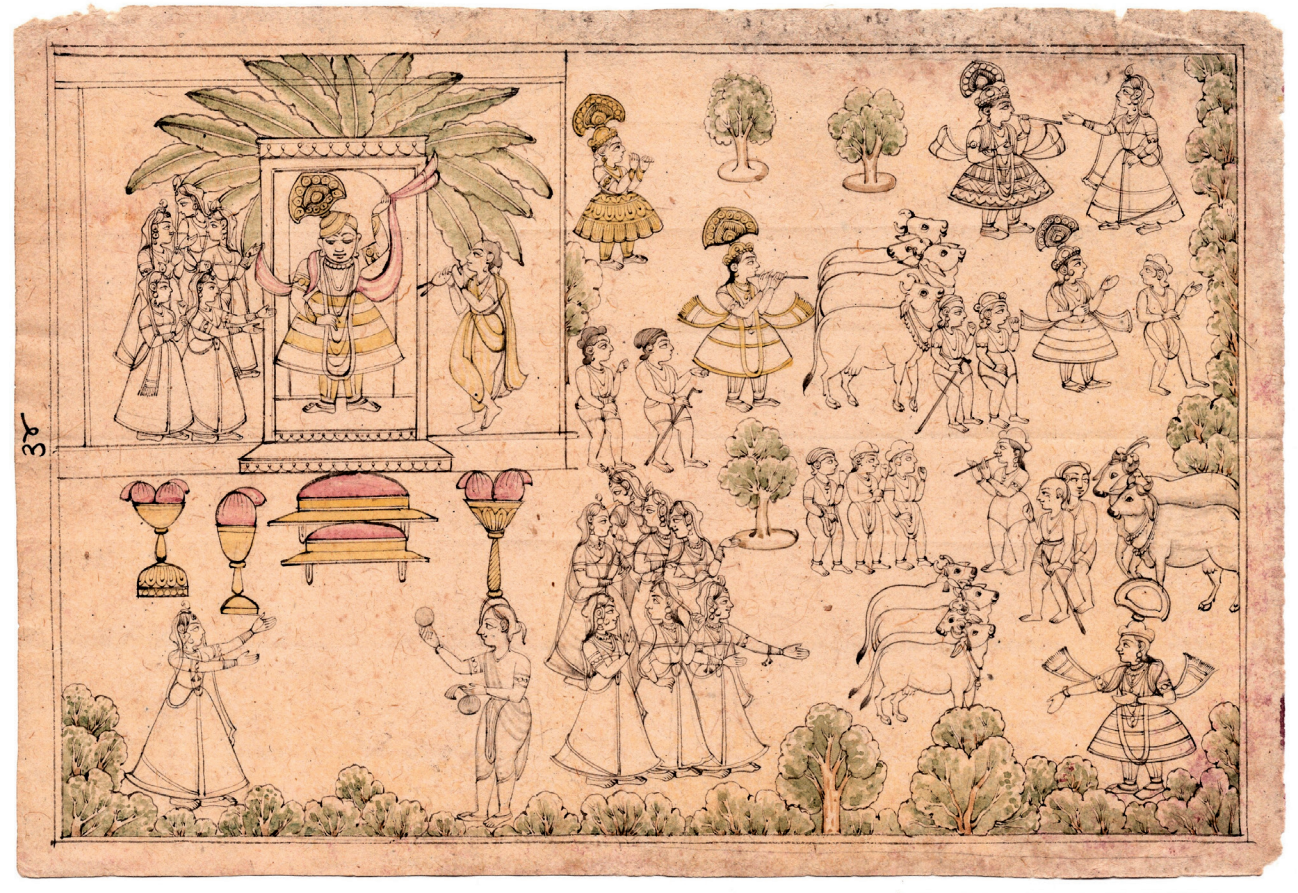
As for her personal collection, her curation is thought-out. “Certain works are held in my personal collection because they are historically or artistically significant, and these are not for sale. The aim is to build an educational body of material that can be shown together to trace the evolution of Pichvai over different periods.”



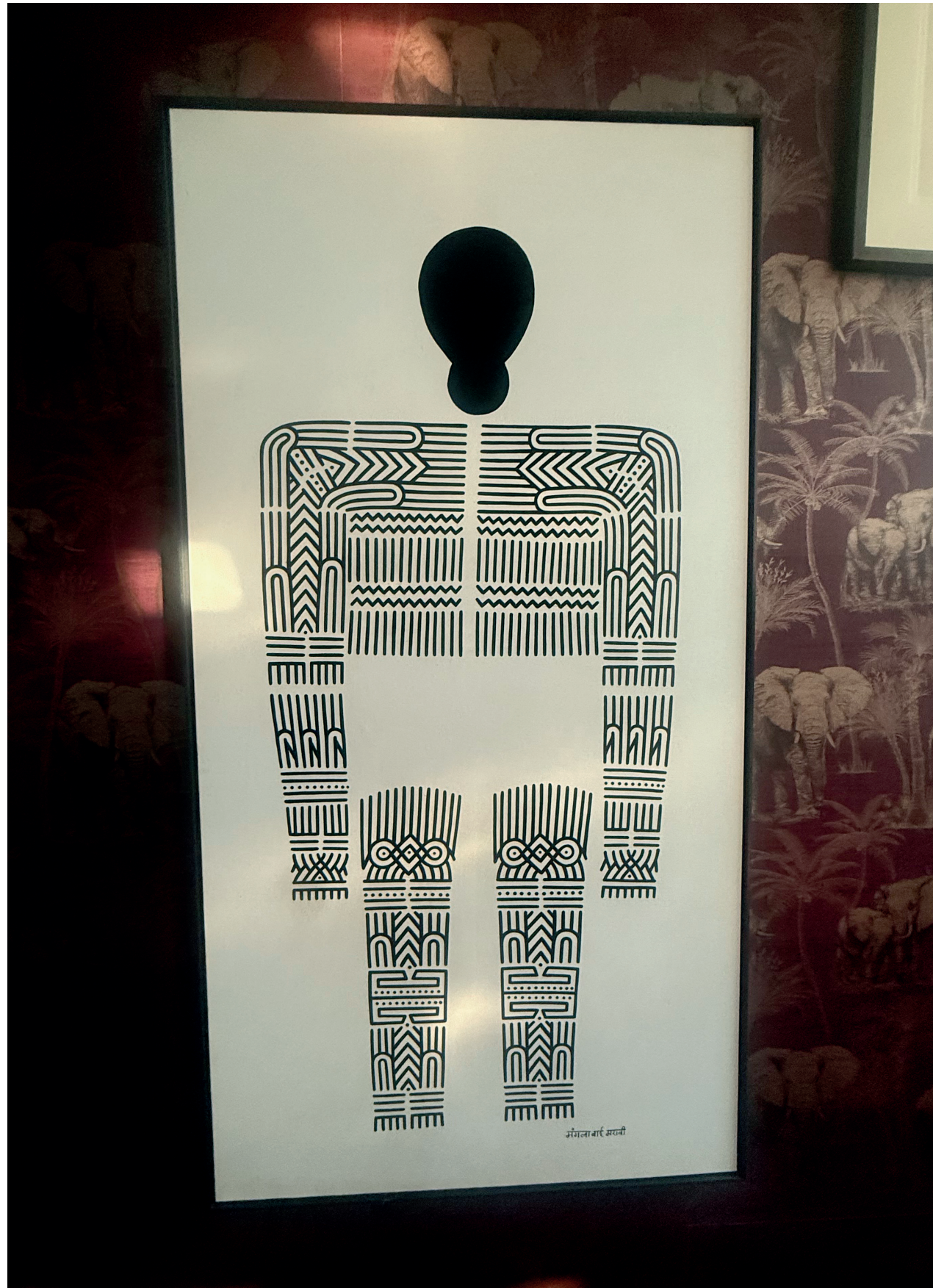
Pooja Singhal



Krishna as Govinda



An untitled sketch



Untitled artwork by Baiga artist Mangala Bai Maravi

Mandiraa Lambba

Co-Founder, Blueprint12

Mandiraa Lambba's childhood was rife with art. "My father was an avid collector, deeply immersed in the modernists and the Bengal School, so my childhood weekends were spent visiting exhibitions, meeting artists, and wandering through nurseries because he loved plants just as much as paintings," she reminisces.

Her personal collection began with a bang; an acquisition that could be considered a find by any standards; a piece by Bengali artist Jamini Roy. "I bought that Jamini Roy with my first Lohri *sagan* [a token of money given as a blessing for the Punjabi harvest festival] money after I got married in January 2005, and I still treasure that work," she tells us.

But while the Jamini Roy painting was her first heavyweight art investment, it wasn't the first piece of art she ever bought, she recalls. "The first painting that truly marked the beginning of my journey with indigenous art was a small work on paper by the late Jangarh Singh Shyam in 2013." Singh Shyam, a pioneering contemporary Indian artist, is often credited with being the creator of a new school of Indian art called Jangarh Kalam, a form of Gond art known for its punctilious dotting, fine lines, and kaleidoscopic colours that depict mythological creatures and imagery. "Something about his story and his visual language immediately pulled me in. His life, his creativity, and the way he transformed a tradition moved me profoundly, and that spirit continues to guide what I collect."

For Lambba, the biggest draw of the traditional, community-created art of native people is the nativity and innocence that is unique to folk art. "There's an honesty and purity of expression about it that feels increasingly rare today," she cites. It's important for her to highlight the generational stories and nuance these forms carry within their frames. "I want people to understand that these traditions are not just 'craft' or 'vernacular'; they are living, breathing art forms that hold entire worlds within them."

Being a collector and a curator can be a double-edged sword, with the temptation to snap up the best pieces first always on the table. "There's a work I recently acquired that came to me in the most unexpected way. I had actually offered it to two other collectors, secretly hoping they would decline so I'd have a reason to buy it myself. And that's exactly what happened."

Her own repertoire of indigenous art is undeniably one of the largest in the country, featuring about 150 works of folk and tribal art. "My approach has always been very clear: I try to collect the master artists from each tribal tradition. It's an ongoing journey, and I'm still far from where I'd like to be."

Lambba finds it hard to pinpoint a prized piece in her collection. But there are a few she considers herself fortunate to have acquired. "I'm deeply attached to all my works, but there is a particular piece by Warli master Jivya Soma Mashe that I feel especially lucky to live with."

Her ever-growing list has a multitude of artists on it, but the one that tops it right now is Sita Devi, a late Indian artist from Jitwarpur, Bihar, who specialised in traditional Madhubani painting. "I've always wanted a work by Sita Devi, but the right piece hasn't surfaced yet. I'm patient—I believe the right work finds you when it's meant to." ■



Mandiraa Lambba