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## BRINGING ART TO THE PEOPLE

Growing up in a country like India means that art and culture are not usually an important component of your formal education and confined to the token class wherein you are taught to make a flower pot and a scenery of v shaped hills with a quarter of a sun peeping out from behind them over a hut with a tiny stream running along it. Over time some students become 'good artists' faithfully copying works of the masters or creating drawings on popular subjects like flowers, butterflies and Ganesha and Buddha from books and the internet. Faced with the exigencies of academics and other more rewarding courses even these handful slowly give up the serious pursuit of art with only a select few going on to hone their talents in art colleges. So for most of us, Art in any form thus gets relegated to something you read about in a newspaper, but never really experience first-hand.

'Serious art' is safely ensconced in the museums visited by intellectuals and students are dragged into them by equally reluctant teachers. No wonder most of us grow up with little appreciation of art in any of its diverse forms and in fact develop certain apathy towards it as we do not comprehend it. The fact that most artists revel in being a part of a select, niche group feted and patronized by art connoisseurs further broadens the gap between art and the common man. I write this after experiencing the same in real life on many occasions especially after being entrusted the work of three museums related to the architecture of Chandigarh. There is thus a need to bring art into the realm of the public not just physically but mentally as well. The visual access to a work of art is reinforced by its entering minds and psyche of the masses. And this is where the art of Manav Gupta comes in. He has created a series of path breaking projects of public art over the years which mark a pioneering movement in India. Much has been said about the actual works in this publication and I will thus not go into the details of the same, but rather explore the importance of such art to bridge the gulf between society and art. Manav Gupta's pioneering concept of Travelling Museums and equally intriguing Permanent Museum prototypes may just as well pave the way to a new way of creating, exhibiting and engaging general masses in the entire journey of a work of art. Even as installations, temporary exhibitions and experimental public art have been very popular in the western world they are still at a nascent stage in our country. Through his unique and intriguing creations Manav Gupta has brought this uncharted medium into sharp focus- paving the way for more of such interactive and thought provoking works.

Much as we may revel in their magnificence, art in general and temporary exhibits in particular are considered a wasteful enterprise in a country struggling to provide the basic amenities to a majority of its citizens. However, Manav Gupta's art is rooted in the very ethos of our country and its culture. Humble, omnipresent and timeless materials are

suddenly elevated to the realm of art that resonates with the universal and sacred. Mud - the most elementary material, evokes the very basic instinct of man-reminding him of his connect with the universe through its timelessness and ancient history. In Indian culture the material also has a special significance embodying five vital elements air, earth, fire, water and also the space the final product contains. Moulded from this mud and clay -these mass produced, inane *diyas*, *kullads* and *chilams* come together in a symphony echoing the song of the universe. But like a true artist he does not restrict himself to just one medium creating functional sculptures and public installations with varied media including iron, steel, wood, discarded roots of trees, glass, recycled scrap and metal. Sustainability and ecological concerns run as undercurrents in his works owing to this eclectic choice of materials that show that art is not an elitist pursuit but in fact a fusion of aesthetics and sensitivity to our context.

However, I feel that Manav Gupta's greatest achievement has been to bring art into the realm of public consciousness. His art is as relatable to the common man as it is ethereal. His marathon live painting session in 2010 at Gurgaon evoked the participation of thousands of employees' making the viewer the creator as well – creating a precious link between art and the common man. Much too often we bemoan the cloistering of art in museums and exhibition halls which seem out of bounds- physically and culturally to the masses. And even when brought into the public realm the subject, content and manifestation of the art work may be beyond the comprehension of most people. But in the case of Manav Gupta's art I think this barrier stands dissolved. The sight of a cascade of a thousand lamps or *chilams* swaying from trees is sure to hold an appeal to even the one uninitiated in art. As I said before it's the kind of art that speaks to everyone even if they may interpret it in their own way. And that is exactly what the world needs at present- art that defies boundaries, that evokes a response and that seems approachable to one and all. Art should be a collaborative effort of an entire society and not just the elitist pursuit of a select few and Manav Gupta's works achieve just that. And he achieves this without resorting to trivialization or simplification of art just to appeal to the masses as we see in many commercially successful but soulless works. In fact by creating works of such a large scale using such humble elements he has created a vocabulary of his own which is at once uplifting yet rooted in the earth. It is awe inspiring to see his installation in 2018 that used nearly half a million units of pottery and covered over one acre creating a surreal landscape never experienced before. It takes courage to break out of the mould of convention and forge your own path in a challenging environment but Manav Gupta has done it again and again whether through his art or his one minute movies on environmental issues. Adding the extra dimension of public engagement to make the masses a part of your journey of creativity is another path breaking endeavor. As a museum professional I feel this is the way to go- to unshackle art from its confines and make it an integral part of our lives as it had been for hundreds of years.

Since I write this article from Chandigarh- the tour de force of Le Corbusier ,an artist, sculptor, architect and planner, it is natural that I would like to draw some parallels with the works of Manav Gupta. Corbusier advocated honesty in the expression of material and form and was always looking for what he called the 'Man- Cosmos' relationship. The same kind of reverence for nature and man's connect with it seems to be the underlying theme of Manav Gupta's work too. Here one also thinks of the other spectrum of creativity that has become the pride and joy of Chandigarh- Nek Chand's Rock Garden. He again took the most humble materials and turned them into works of art with a refreshing creativity as a manifestation of his divine 'land of the Gods'. Isn't Manav Gupta's work in a similar vein- a great outdoor exhibition of 'outsider art' that actually pulls the visitor inside the world of creativity that is fresh yet timeless? The reverence for nature that formed the basis of the works of both Nek Chand and Corbusier is evident in the works of Manav Gupta as well.

May Manav Gupta's art become the way for us to rediscover our tenuous connection with what he calls the "umbilical cords of earth, water, and rainforests". And may this journey help man bond with art in a way that it was meant to be- a deep connect that comes from our most primal visions and values.



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An alumna and faculty member of the Chandigarh College of Architecture she is presently the Director, Le Corbusier Centre & Chandigarh Architecture Museum. Having worked on the preparation of the Dossier for the 'World Heritage' nomination of the Capitol Complex, Chandigarh, she is actively engaged in promoting Chandigarh's heritage also being the Co convener of INTACH, Chandigarh.

She supervised the restoration of the erstwhile house of Pierre Jeanneret, to establish a Jeanneret Museum there, and also undertook restoration of the Le Corbusier Centre for further expansion. She has co-authored the book 'Sukhna -Sublime Lake of Chandigarh' and co-edited the book "Le Corbusier Rediscovered: Chandigarh and beyond". Recently the Sukhna Gallery was curated, designed and established by her in the restored Pump House at the Sukhna lake.