A Collector's Journey

'I want to live close to the art and see the collection whenever I feel like it... where I can go to see the works in my *kurta*.' Today, approximately thirty years after he bought his first Indian painting, this simple statement encapsulates Masanori Fukuoka's collecting philosophy. It has taken the Japanese businessman the better part of three decades to come to this realisation; during which time both the collector and the collection have undergone a purposeful yet natural evolution.



The Glenbarra Art Museum when it first opened in 1991.

Masanori considers himself to have been extremely lucky and privileged in his collecting journey. He has had the luxury of displaying and living with the art he has bought; reflecting on his paintings over time and absorbing the forms as a way of furthering his understanding and appreciation of the artists and their works. His process of buying art has been somewhat romantic; where emotional responses and gut reactions trump all practical considerations.

In some regards, he is an idealist, and his passion in the early years was fuelled by an altruistic sense of duty to his fellow Japanese and to Indian art. He opened the Glenbarra Art Museum in 1991 to share the works of approximately sixty Indian artists of the 20th century with a Japanese audience. When he began buying Indian art in 1990, it was not as a collector, but as a self-appointed envoy for Indian art in Japan.

Despite being a voracious reader of other subjects, Masanori chooses to buy works in somewhat of a vacuum; free of external influences and without much detailed research to further his understanding of the artist, the work, or even a fair price to be paid. An imperfect process, he is quick to admit, as it leaves a wide margin for error. And yes, there have been several mistakes along the way, but this process has allowed him to make his own choices, and, more importantly, it has allowed for the acquisition of some seminal works, often in advance of them being labelled as such by critics and experts in the field. He also confesses that he is in the enviable position where price has not been the primary consideration. 'Price inhibits you from buying the correct work. First decide which work you like, then ask for the price.'

Masanori first visited India in 1975, a rather spontaneous and impulsive trip. He was initially drawn to India as it was the seat of Buddhist learning; a religion that inspired him greatly. He returned to India between twenty and twenty-five times over the next fifteen years, but bought his first painting only in 1990. During these years, he travelled extensively within Asia and all over Europe, and would often buy a painting that appealed to him. None of these, however, ignited the same passion that Indian Art eventually did. It was a trip to the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, and specifically viewing Maqbool Fida Husain's *Cyclonic Silence* that moved him greatly and led him to seek out galleries where he could possibly purchase works by Husain and other artists he had seen in the Museum.

During his visits to India, he developed a close friendship with Surinder Singh, a local Delhi businessman who ran his own export firm. When he first started buying paintings, the logistics of the process were far more complicated than they are today, as galleries were not always equipped to deal with international buyers. He credits Surinder for giving him the confidence to start buying, as he provided vital infrastructure for him.

He found himself in the unique position of approaching Indian art from a completely fresh perspective; an outsider's view, if you will, unburdened by the layers of meanings and references that are often implicit in the works of several artists. Instead, he focused purely on the visual. He bought artists and works he responded to spontaneously; the subjects of the works were secondary. Ironically, not being able to communicate much in English or Hindi also worked in his favour, as his choices were not coloured by either written opinions or detailed explanations from artists. He enjoys the slow, revelatory process of discovering a work, preferably in solitude while living with the work within the comfort of his home or museum over an extended period of time, rather than having a ready opinion foisted upon him.

In the early years, the amount of art purchased may have been more than needed, simply so that there was adequate material to understand the artist and the body of work. Masanori candidly admits that he was sometimes foolish, 'but a fool can learn from his own experiences.'

The idea at the start of this journey was to showcase the works of approximately sixty chosen Indian artists to a Japanese audience. With this philanthropic intent, the Glenbarra Art Museum was set up by, converting some factory space into a public viewing gallery. It is important to note that at this early stage, these artists were not

necessarily reflective of Masanori's own taste, but ones that he thought presented a fair representation of Indian art in the second half of the twentieth century.

Buoyed by this new group of artists, several local Japanese museums collaborated with the Glenbarra Art Museum. They both borrowed works from the Collection, as well as organised shows along the broader theme of Asian Contemporary Art. These include the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, the Yokohama Sogo Art Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama. All the shows were instrumental in exposing a larger number of locals to artists they had not seen before. The Yokohama exhibition showed one hundred works from the Glenbarra collection and had over ten thousand people visit the show over three weeks.

Part of this initiative included publishing a hard-bound book with short essays by various artists and critics, accompanied by over one hundred and fifty illustrations by sixty two artists in the Collection. Although it was published relatively early (1993), it already included some very important works by key artists including V.S. Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, K.K. Hebbar, M.F. Husain and Arpita Singh. These artists form part of the group usually referred to as 'Modern Indian Artists'. Continuing in the vein of approaching Indian Art from a different vantage point, the book was titled *Contemporary Indian Art*. These were artists that were contemporary to the collector. Masanori began collecting when he was young and his experiences were defined by the events and happenings occurring in real time around him. To him, this qualified the art being created at the time as 'contemporary' rather than 'modern', a subtle but important distinction.

The incentive for publishing the book was two-fold. At the time, there were only a few books that focused on Contemporary Indian Art, so this would help place these artists within a context, as well as hopefully encourage other collectors to buy. More importantly, when discussing potential exhibitions with Japanese institutions, the book served as an excellent visual aid to understand the artists in the Collection and their work. The design of the book, as well as the selection of the works, was done in collaboration with artists Ved Nayar and Gogi Saroj Pal, who spent a month with Masanori in Japan discussing what would look best. He acknowledges their contribution and time, which also allowed them to develop a strong friendship.

In 1997, the Indian Government invited the Glenbarra Art Museum to hold a travelling exhibition of key works from the Collection in four cities around India. The exhibition, *Image Beyond Image*, and its accompanying catalogue, marked an important milestone in the perception of Indian art of the 20th century, especially as Indian art was only just beginning to gain commercial and critical recognition in London and New York.

Shortly after the completion of these shows, Masanori underwent a collecting epiphany. He considered himself 'free' of his obligations to the Japanese people and even to Indian Art. His duty on a social level was complete, and he could now focus on collecting artists that excited him and that he personally enjoyed. Thus came the second incarnation of the Museum, which reflected this change in collecting philosophy. He chose to design the museum as an open space that people could visit more easily. Most importantly, the number of artists on display were reduced drastically, from sixty to approximately ten. These included V.S. Gaitonde, Tyeb Mehta, J. Swaminathan, Ganesh Pyne, Arpita Singh, Jogen Chowdhury, M.F. Husain, Nasreen Mohamedi, Akbar Padamsee, F.N. Souza, Krishen Khanna and Ram Kumar. This sub-conscious paring down of the Collection to the core group which remains today, has helped define the fundamental identity and nature of the collection.



The re-built Glenbarra Art Museum in 2000.

Another important change in phase two of the Glenbarra Art Museum was the inclusion of a grand piano within its exhibition space. Having enjoyed Western Classical music from a young age, Masanori feels there is a connection between the sensory experiences of listening to music and looking at art, and believes that music has the power to bring people together. To this end, he has organised several live and recorded concerts at the Museum itself, as another way to draw in members of the local community to enjoy art in its various forms. For him, listening to the music also honed his own eye, since appreciating art and music both require imagination and are therefore synergetic.

What has become abundantly clear over the years is that the works should be in close proximity and accessible to view at any time. As he distilled his collecting vision to focus on the elements essential to him, he also realised that selling works that were not integral to the 'core' collection was a healthy and necessary step for the Museum. A private institution, such as Glenbarra, has the flexibility to sell in order to buy works that are more relevant to the Collection; one of the reasons he has initiated the current auction process. He approaches selling from an entirely practical approach. 'Do not be scared to sell. Selling is a very important part of the collecting journey. I keep what I like and I do not regret what I sell. My memory of what I have sold is short.'

Having said that, the process of choosing which works should be de-accessioned is measured and considered. All potential options are displayed for a period of time to see which works he is especially drawn towards, and which works he would be content to live without. An approach similar to his buying process, both of which are governed by emotions. Most importantly, as is the tenet when he is buying, price is secondary, as it will eventually balance out. 'I know the value the works have for me, and that is more important than the price paid.'

While Masanori may not regret selling a painting once the decision is made, like all collectors, he does regret having moments of hesitation that resulted in lost buying opportunities. The missed opportunity to acquire two works still cause him some regret. These are F.N. Souza's *Mystic Repast* which came up at auction and M.F. Husain's *Spider and the Lamp* which was offered to him privately. In both cases, second-guessing his own instincts caused the blunder; a lesson he has not forgotten.

The museum space is only one part of the role that the collection plays. Loaning works from Glenbarra to fellow institutions allows for interaction with curators and collectors alike, and it continues the philanthropic mantle he took on in the early years. Over the years, several of his works have travelled all over the world for exhibitions, including the Guggenheim Museum and the Met Breuer in New York, the Tate Modern in London and of course several shows in India. A show of forty works by Jogen Chowdhury from the Glenbarra Collection has just concluded in India, having travelled to Kolkata, Mumbai and New Delhi. Looking forward, he would like to plan a Nasreen Mohamedi show in India, exhibiting the works specifically in Baroda, where Nasreen spent many years of her life, amongst other cities.

The evolution of the Museum and the Collection are intrinsically intertwined. The Museum, which has also been around since the very early years, has charted its own parallel journey, mirroring the Collector's own life and path of self-discovery. Over the years, Masanori has also forayed into collecting contemporary Japanese ceramics, as they are closely aligned with his own aesthetic. Unlike the Indian paintings which he interacts with purely on an intellectual and emotional level, he uses the ceramics in daily life, which allows him to enjoy them in a far more tactile manner. The approach, however, is consistent: his art is to be lived with and experienced.



A painting by V.S. Gaitonde displayed alongside contemporary Japanese pottery in Masanori's residence.

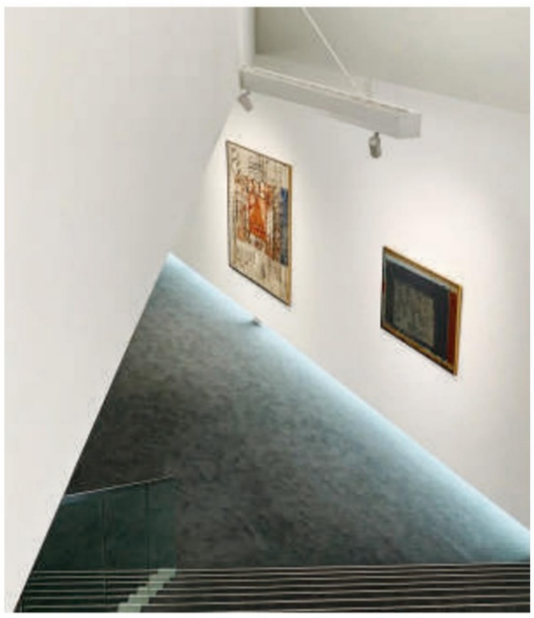
Today, the new Museum which opened in November 2019, exists as an elegant, three-storey structure, adjoining Masanori's home, thus enabling him to wander through it anytime he desires. The new Museum was designed by Junichiro Kawazoe, who won a Gold Award in the Architecture category for design of Museums, Exhibits, Pavilions and Exhibitions at the International Design Awards in 2019 for his design of the new Glenbarra Art Museum. The aesthetics of all the buildings have been conceptually similar: minimal in design with clean lines,

natural light and open spaces that ensure the focus is solely on the art being displayed on the walls. Walking by, one has the good fortune of seeing a black *Benediction* by F.N. Souza hanging on the wall. The walls are never crowded;



The newly built Glenbarra Art Museum in November 2019.

each piece is given plenty of room for the viewer to observe and contemplate in quiet, meditative surroundings for as long as he chooses. Within the building is a smaller, independent exhibition space, which he hopes will be used for synergistic exhibitions such as his contemporary Japanese Ceramics alongside the serene, minimal works of Nasreen Mohamedi or V.S. Gaitonde.



The interior of the new Museum showing the unusual filtration of natural light.

To this end, the current space is testament to the collector's increasingly refined vision. It is an intimate space devoted to showcasing the pivotal, core group of artists he continues to collect today. The art that Masanori has chosen to retain for the collection is entirely consistent with this approach. For him, paintings must lend harmony to their surroundings and not overwhelm or disturb a mood or sentiment. While these do include the more obvious choices such as the large, serene compositions of V.S. Gaitonde or the abstract, tribal compositions of Jagdish Swaminathan, they also include several examples of Tyeb Mehta's famous trussed bull.

By Masanori's own admission, Tyeb was one artist that was always a challenge for him to understand. Tyeb's works never allowed one to get complacent, but constantly forced the viewer to think, question and redefine the boundaries. 'Unlike other artists who would discuss their work if I asked, Tyeb maintained a certain distance and was never quite accessible.' Ironically, despite their difficult subjects and challenging forms, Masanori has placed Tyeb's works in his music room, where the quiet energy of the paintings is echoed in the powerful notes that reverberate all around.

Most importantly, he does not feel they infringe upon his space. He does qualify, however, that he would not buy works from Tyeb's 'diagonal' series, as their thick, diagonal lines fracture the canvas, and by extension, the peace of the space they inhabit. Masanori shares that when he bought his first Tyeb work of a bull, he did not think to ask what the significance was nor felt the need to research it. For a collector as emotional as he, the importance of the artistic inspiration for a work when it was created is, in fact, secondary to the impact that it has when viewed.

Gaitonde's works, on the other hand, simultaneously share his space and yet, retain their independent identities. 'They are separate and self-sufficient, and yet a part of me.' They do not disrupt, but live harmoniously in the space. He enjoys the freedom of looking at them and being able to see different things at different times. 'When you look at a Gaitonde painting, it talks to you.' Beyond painting, Masanori enjoys abstract images in which one is free to see different things. Over the years he has taken several photos during the Indian monsoon; walls with water trickling down, walls covered with moss, or the weathered stone walls of ancient Japanese temples. He even ruminates on the abstract patterns found in the marble of Indian bathrooms. All of these abstract forms provide satisfying mental stimulation for him and are analogous to looking at the complex, ever-changing forms and multiple layers of a Gaitonde composition.

Husain is another artist he respects immensely, both for his love of humanity and, more importantly, for his ability to relinquish control of a painting to the viewer. He never 'pushed his view' upon other people. Masanori narrates a wonderful anecdote about *Reflection*, a painting by Husain from his collection, which happens to be one of his favourite works. The large, monochromatic canvas depicts two elongated, thin figures, possibly a man and a woman,



M.F. Husain, *Reflection*
The Glenbarra Art Museum Collection.

standing at the right edge of the canvas. The figures themselves are executed in tones of grey and the rest of the canvas has been left blank, rendering a rather stark composition. Masanori had two questions upon seeing the work: why did Husain use such a large canvas, and why has he left so much of it blank? To him, the two figures, possibly refugees, share a certain bond, suggested by the gentle manner in which the woman leans in to the man. He states 'they are a good couple' and the emptiness represents a space for hope. The title of the work calls for introspection and self-reflection, as this could be a situation faced by anyone. Upon meeting Husain in Kolkata in the late 1990s, he asked him what the painting meant, to which Husain replied was that it was up to Masanori to interpret the work as he chose. He did mention, however, that Claude Monet's paintings of Haystacks and his attention to the resulting shadows was the inspiration for *Reflection*. This kind of fluidity in understanding the work and discussing its meaning with the artist is another aspect of what he enjoys as a collector.

Masanori has also enjoyed spending time with Jogen Chowdhury over the years, as he considers Jogen's explanations to be sensitive and gentle. Jogen's approach is different, and he is careful not to thrust his view on the collector. He has an intuitive understanding of Jogen's line, and recalls a wonderful childhood memory to explain this kindred connection. He calls it his first experience with 'art', which translates so vividly to one of the most important artists for him today. As a young boy of about thirteen, he recalls a rainy summer day. His home had a small garden lush with green grass. That day, everything was grey, reflecting the dull, dark sky. And then he looked up at the roof, and saw a large spider's web extending from the roof to the wall and the trees, with a huge spider with black and red stripes in the centre. Normally, he would have put as much distance as possible between the spider and himself, but he found himself unable to move; staring, transfixed. Hundreds of rain droplets hung from the web, glinting in the light and appearing like tiny pearls strung on each inch of the large web. It was 'something so ugly, disturbing and yet, something so beautiful.' These lines of the spider's web, intricate and deceptively delicate, is how he responds to the cross-hatch, winding 'web' of Jogen's lines; executed as painstakingly and visually as arresting. 'When I first saw Jogen's work, it appeared ugly to me, but now I understand it. It is far from ugly.' Nature in its myriad forms has remained very important to Masanori throughout his life. He admires beauty in all its forms, and aspires to live with beautiful things around him.

The artists in Masanori's collection today share a unique bond with him through his experiences of their art, and he feels he has learned something from each one of them. When asked which artist he identifies with most, he answers in a characteristically enigmatic style. 'It is difficult because what I am and what I want to be are all part of me… I may aspire to be like a Tyeb, monumental, but sometimes I may be more like a character from a Jogen sketch… Both are equally important parts of you. In truth, you must be like Husain, if you wish to choose to be like one artist, you must accept them all.' The key for Masanori is to always look with an open mind and then to quietly contemplate the art over time.

He continues to actively collect, looking for that one elusive work that might fill an important gap in the collection, and so his artistic journey continues… 'I have a belief that one of out every hundred million people has to be an artistic genius. So by that logic, in India, a country of over a billion people, there should be at least ten geniuses – maybe I will find another!'

The time that my journey takes is long and the way of it long.

I came out on the chariot of the first gleam of light, and pursued my voyage through the wilderness of worlds leaving my track on many a star and planet.

It is the most distant course that comes nearest to thyself, and that training is the most intricate which leads to the utter simplicity of a tune.

The traveller has to knock at every alien door to come to his own, and one has to wander through all the outer worlds to reach the innermost shrine at the end.

My eyes strayed far and wide before I shut them and said 'Here art thou!'

The question and the cry 'Oh, where?' melt into tears of a thousand streams and deluge the world with the flood of the assurance 'I am!'

Rabindranath Tagore, Gitanjali, 12

…The poem that brought me to India for the first time in 1975.

Masanori Fukuoka
Director, Glenbarra Art Museum