

Foreword

1.

The hill state of Uttarakhand is well known for its rich cultural, artistic and architectural heritage. The tradition of its unique arts and crafts is visible all around the state: from homes to temples, clothing to cultural ceremonies and agriculture to traditional business. It is also evident, on the one hand, in the folk art of Aipan and other decorations and, on the other, in the beautiful wood carvings on windows and doors and the tools associated with agriculture. All these things reflect the artistic skills and aesthetics of the society. It is remarkable that the hill art has never been a secluded activity, but was an integral part of the livelihood and lifestyle of the tribal and rural communities of the hills. Just like breathing, eating and ploughing. It is difficult to separate art from work and work from the art because both are inclusive activities. Also, art in Uttarakhand cannot be identified in a fragmented manner but has to be approached in its entirety and as a unit of a uniform life. For example, the mountain dwellers on the borders of Nepal and Tibet have been known for skillful weaving of woolen clothes, but those clothes are essential for protection against severe cold and snowfall, and it is their art all the same. It is unfortunate that till now very few efforts have been made to collect, promote and preserve the rich heritage of the state's arts and crafts, and these efforts are restricted to the regional margins and could not be developed in a comprehensive manner.

Diversity has been one of the biggest identities of Uttarakhand art. The temple art of Uttarakhand, the unique architecture of Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri, Jageshwar and Bageshwar temples and the statues of local deities made in rural areas are the finest examples. The old houses, many of them abandoned today, have been the storehouse of stone architecture which indicates that this region was quite developed in residential architecture and design. *Tebaries*, or three-storey houses, were a distinct feature of this architecture. The intricate geometrical and floral patterns carved on their wooden doors and windows and bright colours give them a unique place in residential architecture. This residential architecture was different in various regions and depicted the diverse geo-aesthetic perception of society. Today, when a bland and superficial kind of architecture has made inroads in the hilly regions, the old pattern of three-storey houses with miniature inscriptions and motifs can be found only in areas dominated by the tribal people. Also, there cannot be any match for the artistic weaving of woolen and silk clothes which are made along the border areas of Uttarakhand. These clothes are a wonderful gift from the tribal community of Uttarakhand and their unique patterns and designs are rarely found in any other state. The beautiful carvings on brass commodities like *hukkas*, *gagar*, *tashtari*, *diyas*, *kalash*, and other household items denote another dimension of the art which flourished in this region.

There is a dire need to collect and protect these artistic traditions. At the same time, it is also necessary to promote the modern art of Uttarakhand, the genesis of which can be traced back to Moula Ram, a famous artist, poet and historian (1743-1833) who is rightly attributed to be the pioneer of the Garhwal Kalam in the history of Indian art. Moula Ram started his artistic journey under the influence of the miniature art popular during the Mughal period, but later on developed his own individualistic style. One of his famous works is the landscape of Srinagar. Some of his artworks are displayed in Britain, the USA, Bharat Kala Bhawan, Banaras and Hemwati Nandan Bahuguna Garhwal University, Srinagar, but there is no independent museum dedicated to his artworks in his own home state. Since long, Uttarakhand has also been witness to the large-scale migration from the hills to urban centres and mega cities. Artistic talents from this state were no exception to the exodus aimed at looking for better opportunities. A number of those creative personalities achieved name and fame in the cities where they stayed but, unfortunately, Uttarakhand could not be much benefited from their accomplishments.

Uttara Samkaleen Kala Sangrahalaya (Uttara Museum for Contemporary Art) is an attempt to bring the modern and contemporary art activities under one roof. First of its kind, it is indeed a dynamic initiative for creating space for contemporary and future art of Uttarakhand. It comprises a permanent display of the works of the National Award-winning artist Surendra Pal Joshi, who was born in Dehradun. There is also a separate floor for a modern art gallery where art practitioners and craftsmen can showcase their old and new works whenever they wish. With this, they will have the opportunity to carry forward the artistic legacy of the great painter and poet Moula Ram, who is attributed to being the pioneer of the Garhwal Kalam, to modern and postmodern heights.

2.

Surendra Joshi's works exhibited in Uttara are multidimensional. They comprise his recent paintings, sculpture, sketches, digital prints, installations and video, providing a complete artistic experience. Viewed by the visitors, these works will appear beautiful and brilliant, but at the same time they will expose the visitors to those realities which have been the take-off points for most of these works. Moved by the devastating floods of Kedarnath and Gangotri in 2013, Surendra Joshi travelled to the affected regions and recorded his overall experiences in the form of sketches, figures and colours. His journey was not restricted to the flood-affected areas only, but it became a study-oriented visit to Uttarakhand and the life of the people in the Himalayan state. The artworks exhibited in Uttara are the outcome and expressions of this journey. They reflect the turbulent memories of the devastating floods and the struggle of the people with natural disasters and nature itself, which is always a source of both beauty and courage.

Many of these works are focused on the Kedarnath tragedy, and perhaps this is the first time that an eminent artist has depicted the images of post-disaster Himalayas in such a way. Nicholas Roerich, born in the 19th century, was perhaps the first artist to profile the Himalayan ranges on his canvases, but the Himalayan terrain in Surendra's works is quite different from that of Roerich's works. In Roerich's canvases we see the Himalayas as the symbol of peace, beauty and mystery, as if immersed in some meditation. Surendra avoids a mere realistic depiction of the Himalayas and its tragedy, but transgresses his experience so that only a shadow of reality remains visible, thereby turning his work into independent art creation. In modern art, reality separates itself from realistic depiction and gets transformed into some other reality. The sketches done by Surendra Joshi also fit into this definition. They appear effortless, realistic and spontaneous as if done on the spot, but the layers of colours and their arrangements impart them an abstract character and keep them in an independent category. While drawing, particularly while drawing sketches, it is imperative for the artist to know what needs to be drawn and what to be avoided. Surendra has kept this in mind and structured his sketches in such a manner that they could be very well seen as independent paintings.

Surendra Joshi is an innovative artist and has done some very interesting experiments in the art of installation in recent years. Using thousands of safety pins, he had created a huge helmet, which was much appreciated in the art world. With the surrounding music and light and a headphone attached to it, the helmet turned out to be a very impressive installation. Another important installation, *Paani*, again made of safety pins, depicts the wrath of water. He has sculpted the three most popular symbols of the hills—the *dhol*, the *damau*, and the *ghilda*, with the same medium and style, which, in fact, reflect the true spirit of this museum. Both *dhol* and *damau* have always been essential parts of hill life and have a sacred place in almost all the rituals of the people of Uttarakhand. Right from the birth ceremony to the wedding, *jatra* to *hawan*, fairs and markets, *dhols* and *damaus*, or *nagaras*, are

popular and visible everywhere. The downtrodden communities have been the maestros of *dhol*-playing. Similarly, the *ghilda* has been a permanent companion of the hill women. The womenfolk carry it to bring produce from the fields, fodder from the forests and other household commodities. Surendra Joshi has used these well-known tools as symbols of life in the hills. In the same spirit, the replica of a wooden house is also exhibited here. This residential architecture is on the verge of extinction now and its presence in the exhibition is like a memory and a metaphor of the mountains. All these three items are apt and perfect images of Uttarakhand.

Uttara Contemporary Art Museum is the first-ever institution of its kind which has come into existence in Uttarakhand. I hope contemporary artists will take this museum to new and constructive heights.

—Mangalesh Dabral

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