

JOOST VAN DEN BERGH

Based in London since 1988, Joost van den Bergh has dealt in Indian and South East Asian art for over 25 years, focussing particularly on sculpture and works of art. He also deals in other areas of Asian art, including Tibet and Japan.

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Perfect Presence,
Tantra, Jain and Ritual
Art from India, London
2019

HOW DID YOU GET INTO THE BUSINESS OF DEALING WITH ASIAN ART?

From a young age I had a keen interest in modern architecture, design and art – particularly Bauhaus and De Stijl. I came to London in 1988 to study art history for one year. Straight after completing the course I undertook my first work placement. This was in the Old Masters department at Sotheby's in London, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The work gave me a fantastic grounding, and it was an exciting time. I then went to work for a dealer in Chinese porcelain in the Netherlands. It was the first time that I'd been exposed to non-European as well as three-dimensional art and, although I realised fairly quickly that Chinese art was not my passion, it opened my eyes to a new world. After this experience I decided to study paper conservation back in London – a combination of wanting to work with my hands, and with paper, which had been a long-standing passion, and still is. In the very first weeks of my course, old friends from the Asian art trade in London started giving me things to work with, such as Indian miniature paintings. I was therefore running a business pretty much from the start of my course. I fell in love with Indian painting immediately. This then brought me in touch with Himalayan painting and, of course, I then started looking at sculpture and bronzes. Whilst practising as a conservator in London I was also working part time for a dealer in Chinese art. It was then that I started dealing, on a small scale, in Indian art. Eventually I found I couldn't do both, so here we are today. One other important occurrence was that sometime in the early 1990s, at a stall on Portobello Road, by chance (or perhaps it wasn't chance at all...) I picked up a striking red catalogue, attracted by the simple yet beautiful design of its cover. On leafing through it, something clicked and I felt an instant connection to the amazing objects illustrated inside. These mysterious, highly abstract geometric shapes were not something I had



ever known existed, yet they had a familiarity about them, and somehow made sense. This was the 1971 Hayward catalogue of Tantric art, which has now become an integral part of what I deal in. I have organised numerous exhibitions and published several catalogues on the subject.

HOW DID YOU BROADEN YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF YOUR SPECIALIST FIELD?

One of the best things about being a dealer is having to expose myself constantly to new and different objects. Almost everything I handle is unique, so I am constantly learning, always questioning different aspects of each and every work. I am lucky that I get to travel quite a lot, and have the chance to immerse myself in different cultures, visiting dealers, collectors and museums. As a result, I constantly encounter new areas of interest – leading, for example, to my current Kalu Ram exhibition. My next catalogue (nearly completed) will be taking an entirely new direction – watch this space! A handful of other projects are brewing, too; a couple are related to my main area of interest, but others are veering off in other directions. This is what keeps me stimulated and inspired.

DOES YOUR EXPERIENCE IN PAPER RESTORATION GIVE YOU AN ADVANTAGE OVER OTHER DEALERS?

I am not sure. What I do know is that works on paper still hold an important place for me, whether dealing or collecting. There is something so wonderful about the directness of the image – a certain spontaneity. Interestingly, as I get older, I feel I am becoming less fussy about a piece of work being in a 'perfect' condition. In fact, I probably prefer an artwork that is in its original state rather than highly restored and pristine! Last week I purchased a fabulous Indian painting – it's not in a perfect state at all, but the main image is intact, beautiful in its untouched and original state.

IN ADDITION TO YOU, WE HAVE SEVERAL MEMBERS ESTABLISHED IN THE UK. WHY DO YOU THINK THE ENGLISH MARKET IS SO INTERESTED IN ASIAN ART?

Well, there has always been a strong historical connection between the Indian subcontinent and the UK, and there are many clients who have inherited

Beneath The Pavement,
in collaboration with S|2
London 2017



works from their family, purchased through travel to the region. There are also a number of world-class museums here, with fabulous permanent collections and temporary exhibitions. And the UK has a very long history of established auction houses and dealers.

DO YOU EVER HAVE ANY REGRETS ABOUT THE ARTWORKS YOU HAVE SOLD, WISHING YOU HAD KEPT A HOLD OF THEM YOURSELF?

Many! Particularly Tantric works. However, I made the decision when I first started dealing that I would keep my dealing and collecting entirely separate. So when I buy a piece for the business, I know it is destined to move on to a new home. When I buy privately, it is not for sale. My private buying is in very different areas to Asian art. I also do not want to compete with my clients...

YOU MENTIONED YOUR EXHIBITION DEDICATED TO KALU RAM. WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART MARKET?

I wouldn't really call myself a dealer in contemporary Indian art, but I do have a strong interest in contemporary art in general. And over the years I have introduced a few contemporary Asian works here and there – most notably in an exhibition curated with Alexander Gorlizki called 'A Concentration of Power', as well as some works in a Tantra show last year entitled 'Perfect Presence'. Kalu Ram was an amazing Tantric painter, fairly unknown until now. It was a dream to be able to acquire his inventory and introduce his work to the market. The work has been amazingly well received.

DO YOU COLLECT OTHER CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS?

I am not restricted to any one artist in my dealing and collecting, although sometimes I like to buy several works if I feel I have 'discovered' someone...

ARE THERE ANY NEW OR UNDER-COLLECTED AREAS IN ASIAN ART THAT HAVE CAUGHT YOUR ATTENTION RECENTLY?

Actually most of the works I deal in are relatively

Kalu Ram (Jaipur 1940's–2010)
Menagerie of Magical Beasts
c. 2005–2010
Gouache on paper, signed lower right
Height: 28 cm (11 in)
Width: 23 cm (9 in)





affordable. There are still areas to discover. Kalu Ram being one example but also the more popular art from India is still under collected.

DO YOU TRY TO ATTRACT YOUNGER AUDIENCES TO THE ASIAN ANTIQUE ART SCENE?

I am always amazed at the wide range of people who come to exhibitions. The recent Kalu Ram exhibition attracted a large number of younger visitors, and that is the case whenever I organise a Tantra show, too. Instagram is also a fabulous tool, and the majority audience there are young. Having said that, an 80-year-old friend just set up an account with the most brilliant posts...

SO DIGITALISATION PLAYS AN IMPORTANT PART?

That remains to be seen, I think. We have to go more digital, and my experience with Instagram has been incredible. I also have a website, although I see that more as a viewing place; there isn't the facility to purchase directly from it, but I am still not quite sure anyway that that would work with the kind of things I deal in. Being rather old fashioned, I still produce printed catalogues every year – ink on paper. For me they work, and I love the process of putting them together. Recent editions have also proved that clients love receiving paper catalogues by post. I have several catalogues in the pipeline at this moment in time.