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COLLABORATION

REPORT

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THE ARDEE FOUNDATION: Bridging Education and Art



↑ Installation View Manjit Bawa: An Enduring Legacy, 2026. All Images Courtesy: Ardee Foundation.

Since its establishment in 1997, The Ardee Foundation has evolved into an interconnected cultural platform where education, art, acquisition and public engagement operate within a shared framework to promote Indian arts. Founded by the late Shri Ashok Varma, the former Chairman of the Ardee Organisation and former President of The Fore School of Management, the Foundation maintains a consistent sense of purpose to respond to ever-evolving cultural and social scenarios. At a time when education and art are governed by the logics entrenched in commercials and homogeneity, the Foundation proposes an alternative approach to value plural reflection. A way forward for an empathetic responsibility towards learning as a collective

public commitment. Through exhibitions, research initiatives, educational programmes and public dialogue, it cultivates spaces where artists, students, scholars and audiences encounter ideas critically with artistic practices and participate in shaping a thoughtful future.

The ethos is deeply personal as well as institutional for his daughter, Shefali Varma, under whose leadership the Foundation has further buttressed its salient features. Reflecting on the grounds of her engagement with art, she recalls it, "Preceded conscious choice, it was, quite simply, an inheritance of sensibility." Growing up in an environment where "culture, architecture and aesthetic inquiry formed the fabric of daily existence,"



↑ M.F. Husain at Shefali Varma's Home.

and accompanying her father through studios and conversations with many significant Indian artists. For Varma, who now also serves as an Advisor to the Kochi Biennale Foundation, these formative years shaped a way of thinking that continues to inform the Foundation's direction.

Central to the Foundation's cultural philosophy is The Ardee Centre for Culture, which was initially known as the Centre for Contemporary Art. The Centre has emerged as one of India's early platforms for contemporary artistic practice to present artists who have been kernel to the modern Indian art canon, including Manjit Bawa, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, F.N. Souza, J. Swaminathan, Arpita Singh and Sumakshi Singh. Relocated to Lutyens' Delhi from Connaught Place, the Centre calibrates process over spectacle. Now being revived as a space for patrons, it is a living embodiment of salon-style exhibitions, a research library, sculpture gardens and an open-air amphitheatre. Reaffirming its original mandate, the Centre supports young and emerging artists, particularly from indigenous and underrepresented communities, through

studios, mentorship and exhibition opportunities to culminate in long-term creative participation.

Varma's interdisciplinary education in literary studies and design provides an analytical lens to deconstruct the visual aesthetic in contemporary times. Literary studies sharpened her sensitivity to narrative, symbolism and subtext, while design education refined her understanding of form, materiality and spatial relationships. Both these disciplines encouraged a mode of inquiry that steers beyond the limited appreciation of the visual enchantment. Collecting thus emerged as a pursuit rooted in close reading, contextual awareness and historical understanding. It supports ongoing conversation with artworks as cultural documents within broader artistic and social contexts.

The art collection in the hands of Varma thrives upon the notion of "Identity, integrity and originality while maintaining dialogue with established artistic lineages," without losing a site to visceral touch. The collection transmutes as a breathing archive to perpetuate Varma's discernment and



↑ Manjit Bawa, Man Attacking Bird, 1992.



↑ Anju Dodiya, Crescent, 2017.



↑ F.N. Souza, Nude in Profile, 1950

stewardship. Each acquisition germinates from a point of intimate instinct ensued by research into an artist's conceptual evolution, art historical position, provenance and authenticity of thought. Mapping modern masters, women artists and contemporary practitioners vis-à-vis the act of collection is as crucial as the support of indigenous art forms, which are recognised as the core of Indian artistic inheritance.

The collection of the Foundation in Delhi and Goa speaks to this pedagogical philosophy coupled with curatorial practice. The Delhi collection encompasses the works by Manjit Bawa, F.N. Souza, M.F. Husain, V.S. Gaitonde, Jamini Roy, Zarina Hashmi, J. Swaminathan, Arpita Singh and Shilpa Gupta to trace key trajectories of Indian modern and contemporary art. The Goa collection foregrounds indigenous, folk and experimental contemporary practices, including works by Jangarh Singh Shyam, Durga Bai, Jodhaiya Bai Baiga and Mithu Sen. Together, these collections propose a field of coexistence in which multiple traditions speak to one another. As Varma expounds, "For me, collecting represents

both an act of historical memory and an investment in cultural futurity," framing collecting as a form of custodianship.

With a demonstrated history of liberated thought and inclusivity, a commitment which is articulated through the Ardee Schools. Within these environments, art remains a locus of everyday pedagogy. The presence of folk, tribal, modern and contemporary practices within shared learning spaces prompts students to encounter Indian art as plural, layered and continually in formation. Students embrace the multiplicity of materials, histories and ideas of artistic practice to attend to the complexity of social imagination. Through outreach programmes, students nurture curiosity, empathy and interpretive skills. Public engagement is a fluid extension of this exercise. Varma elucidates, "My programmes proceed from a fundamental principle, art must be accessible, democratic and educationally grounded." The focus lies in building meaningful collaboration among curators, artisans and creative practitioners to ensure both intellectual curiosity and cultural accountability. Such partnerships



↑ Installation View Shobha Broota: *The Lightness of Being*, 2025-26.

open room for diverse knowledge systems to enrich artistic discourse within contemporary society.

The commitment found visibility through the public presentation of Shobha Broota's work with the exhibition *Shobha Broota: The Lightness of Being* at the Kochi Biennale 2025-2026. The exhibition, supported by Gallery Espace, was curated by Ina Puri, who is also the art advisor to the Foundation. The exhibition drew attention to Broota's process-driven practice, meditative abstraction and disciplined engagement with time and texture. By foregrounding introspection, the exhibition aligned closely with the Foundation's broader values to determine how its educational ethos extends beyond its own institutional spaces into a larger circuit of conversations. Intergenerational exchange runs as a continuous thread through the Foundation's work and finds focused expression in the Annual Ardee Legacy Award. The programme brings together a modern master and an emerging student-artist who respond to the legacy of transformation. The inaugural presence of the Foundation at India Art Fair 2026, with the exhibition *Manjit Bawa: An Enduring*

Legacy, honoured the modernist master of the figurative genre. Yet another curation by Ina Puri for the Foundation, the exhibition presented a repository of paintings and sketches from Bawa's career to explore symbolic motifs of his unique sensibility to spirituality in art. Visitors from different walks of life could experience the power of his imagery to appreciate the playful yet profound aesthetics of his artistic vision.

Across its schools, collections, exhibitions, biennale and fair, the Foundation underlines Varma's aspiration, "To cultivate a generation marked by cultural confidence, intellectual curiosity and authentic rootedness." It nurtures and nourishes an ecosystem where the Foundation positions creativity as a civic asset. The initiatives led by the Foundation anticipate that, over the course of time, the communities will develop a deep bond with art as an essential feature of a heightened life. As Varma affirms, "Art transcends private collections and institutional walls; it must reside within consciousness, indelibly inscribed in vibrant, enduring colour".



↑ Shefali Varma in front of Rekha Rodwittiya's *Matters of the Heart*.

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