



ARDEE ART FOUNDATION

A PATRON-LED CULTURAL INSTITUTION

# Three Women Benefactors of the Art World

by Critical Collective

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## **SHEFALI VARMA, CHAIRPERSON, ARDEE FOUNDATION**

**Gayatri Sinha (GS):** As a collector of art over the last several years, how does your position as the Chairperson of the Ardee Schools influence your acquisitions? Do you acquire art with your institutions in mind?

**Shefali Varma (SV):** Collecting, for me, has always been deeply personal, but over time it has naturally evolved to intersect with my institutional responsibilities. As Chairperson of the Ardee Schools, I am constantly thinking about the role art plays in shaping young minds. While many works in my collection were acquired out of personal resonance, I increasingly consider how certain works can contribute to a broader educational environment. At Ardee, we have consistently tried to bring students into direct contact with artists and their processes. Over the years, the school has hosted several distinguished artists — including Krishen Khanna, Jayasri Burman, Jaya Ganguly, to name a few — who conducted live demonstrations for students. These sessions allowed students to observe how artists think and work.

Art in a school setting cultivates curiosity and critical thinking. When students encounter artworks in their everyday surroundings, it subtly shapes their relationship with creativity and cultural expression. While my acquisitions continue to be guided by instinct and intellectual engagement with the work, I remain mindful of how some pieces might eventually enter institutional spaces where they can inspire and engage younger audiences.

**GS:** Your father Mr Ashok Varma was quite well-known in Delhi for his highly progressive gallery CCA and his list of avant-garde artists. Several CCA shows went on to resonate with artists and viewers. Now even the catalogues are viewed as collectibles. How did growing up within that environment influence your own sensibility as a collector?

**SV:** My father had a remarkable ability to recognize artistic talent. Through CCA, he supported artists who were often ahead of their time, and approached them with both intellectual curiosity and deep personal commitment. He believed strongly in nurturing artists and building lasting relationships with them, rather than simply presenting exhibitions or acquiring work.

Over the years, he developed close friendships with leading figures in Indian modern art, including M.F. Husain and Manjit Bawa. These relationships went beyond professional circles, and a shared belief in the transformative power of art. Growing up around that environment meant that art was always present as a living conversation rather than just objects on a wall. He trusted his instincts and supported artists whose work carried originality and depth, an approach that has certainly shaped my own perspective. I am drawn to works that possess a strong voice and authenticity, and I see collecting not merely as acquisition, but as a form of stewardship — supporting artistic practices and preserving works that contribute meaningfully to our cultural discourse.

**GS: You recently joined the Kochi Biennale Foundation as an advisor on the board and a Platinum Patron. Going forward, how do you see your role in that organization? Do you believe such large-scale art events influence the broader ecosystem? What can be done to expand this imprint?**

**SV:** My association with the Kochi Biennale Foundation (KBF) as an advisor on the board and a Platinum Patron is both a commitment to supporting one of India's most significant cultural initiatives and an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the larger contemporary art ecosystem. Platforms like the Kochi-Muziris Biennale (KMB) have played a transformative role in expanding public engagement with contemporary art in India, bringing together artists, curators, scholars and audiences from across the world. Going forward, I see my role not only as a patron but also as someone who can help strengthen the connections between cultural institutions, educational environments and emerging audiences.

I also see the Ardee Foundation playing an active role, especially in the Students' Biennale section. In the current edition of the Biennale, we brought a group of Ardee School art students to Kochi as part of an art immersion programme. Experiencing the Biennale across its many venues was incredibly powerful for them. Within a short span of time, they were deeply absorbing the environment — sketchbooks filled up quickly, conversations around artworks grew thoughtful, and their curiosity expanded in ways that a classroom alone cannot facilitate. In conjunction with the Biennale, the Ardee Foundation presented a collateral programme featuring works by Shobha Broota, who conducted a live demonstration of her knitting practice for students to observe. Similarly, at the 2026 India Art Fair (IAF), the Foundation presented a special programme featuring student artists selected through the Ardee Legacy Award. The students were chosen by a jury comprising Jayasri Burman, Prayag Shukla, Amit Das, Manisha Parekh and Reha Sodhi, through a rigorous selection process, which involved having the master artist Manjit Bawa as the point of reference.

The selection was undertaken. The exhibition at the fair was curated by Ina Puri. The programme created a meaningful exchange between emerging student practitioners and the legacy of a master artist, while also offering young artists a platform within one of the country's most prominent art events. Moments like these reaffirm the importance of such cultural platforms. Large-scale art events like the KMB and the IIAF energize the artistic ecosystem — they create visibility for artists, encourage dialogue across disciplines, and invite the wider public to encounter contemporary artistic practices in meaningful ways. To expand this impact further, I believe the next step lies in strengthening year-round engagement through educational programmes, collaborations with schools and universities, and deeper institutional partnerships. When younger audiences are brought into these cultural spaces, it not only enriches their understanding of art but also helps cultivate the next generation of thinkers, artists and patrons, who will sustain the future ecosystem.

**GS: What role should art play in creating a more cultured and humane society?**

**SV:** Art has been one of the most powerful ways through which societies reflect upon themselves. It allows individuals to pause, question and engage with ideas that go beyond the immediate concerns of everyday life. In a rapidly changing world, art helps cultivate empathy, sensitivity and the ability to appreciate different perspectives — qualities that are essential for building a more thoughtful and humane society. What makes art particularly important is its ability to bring people into dialogue with their cultural and social environments.

When individuals encounter artistic expression, they begin to see the diversity and complexity of human experience. That reflective capacity is fundamental to developing a more culturally aware society that values art, dialogue, imagination and memory. Supporting artistic practices ultimately strengthens the intellectual and emotional fabric of society.

**GS: You are currently building a space to facilitate engagement with a spectrum of the arts, both in terms of presentation and discussion. What can you share about this upcoming art project?** ?

**SV:** We are developing the Ardee Cultural Centre in the heart of New Delhi as a space for contemporary artistic and intellectual exchange, bringing together artists, curators, scholars, and cultural practitioners from India and around the world. Once completed, it will host exhibitions, artist talks, panel discussions, performances, workshops and cultural gatherings. It will also encourage interdisciplinary collaborations across literature, performance, design and other creative fields. Through these initiatives, the Centre aims to create an environment where ideas can circulate freely and audiences can engage meaningfully with contemporary cultural practices.

By bringing together diverse voices and working closely with other foundations, the Ardee Cultural Centre aims to build a networked cultural ecosystem — where institutions can share ideas, resources, audiences and collectively strengthen the cultural landscape. These collaborations will enable joint programming and initiatives that support established and emerging artists in South Asia and beyond.