Mohar Gupta

Art is for Everyone

Mohar Gupta, a Calgary based interdisciplinary artist and art educator is healing her community through art. Growing up in Bengal, India, her childhood was a whirlwind of Indian art and culture. Both her parents loved to create art in their free time. Her father's media of choice was watercolour, and her mother would sew and craft. Mohar wanted a successful life for herself, so she decided to pursue medicine as a career. After high school she studied botany at the University of Calcutta, and she graduated with a Bachelor of Science (BSc) in 1997. Unsatisfied with her studies, Mohar decided to go to the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) and planned to pursue a career in art. After a gruelling interview process, she was accepted into a master's program in textile design and development and graduated in 2002. Subsequently, she worked for a silk company in India as a designer fulfilling custom orders for European clients. Later she was also employed by an embroidery company where they crafted textiles by hand.

In 2006, Mohar and her family immigrated to Australia because of her husband's job. Coincidentally, one of her old professors started working at the University of Melbourne, and invited Mohar to work on a research project. The initiative focused on studying the similarities and differences between Australian motif art and Indian folk art. Learning about another culture for the first-time piqued her interest and broadened Mohar's perspective. Mohar and her family moved to Calgary, Alberta in 2014. Finding work in the textile industry proved to be very difficult. All the employment opportunities were inaccessible because her university transcripts were not accepted in Canada. After two years as a housewife, Mohar wanted to find purpose again. She decided to paint with acrylics.

Starting up her art career was much harder than Mohar expected and fitting into the art community was difficult. In 2020, Mohar had a break in her career. After reaching out to the immigration council for art innovation, they gave her a chance to exhibit her art for the first time at Art Commons (1). This exhibition was curated by Miriam Fabijan and was focused on female artists and their stories. Exhibiting at Art Commons also gave her the chance to learn how to write grant proposals and about networking opportunities. She continues to work with important relationships such as the ones she solidified with Miriam Fabijan and Art Commons.

Mohar's art style before coming to Canada was heavily influenced by traditional Indian folk art. In Canada, Mohar reinterpreted her art style to combine it with more contemporary western art. Her art still holds many similarities to her traditional style and textile training. Mohar uses different materials to try and create tactile artworks. Her favourite piece is an abstract canvas called Autumn that pictures a vibrant colour scheme that has been textured with string and other materials. This large canvas brings fall colours to life,

almost as if the landscape is jumping out in three-dimension.

"I want to provide opportunity for those that do not have it."

After developing her art practice in Calgary, she started getting requests from community members to teach art. Mohar took on a few students and soon she realized the inaccessibility of art to immigrant children. All art programs and courses are so expensive that lower-income families can't afford them. Wanting to share her art and culture with her community Mohar founded Art with Mohar in 2016. Her affordable online classes make art accessible for everyone. Mohar hopes to create a welcoming and enriching environment for people of all ages to come to and explore their artistic talents. Having had to navigate the art world alone as a new immigrant, she wants to make that experience easier for others.

Community art projects are Mohar's focus. Government grants through the City of Calgary and Calgary Arts Development (2) fund these projects and ensure that they are free of charge to anyone who wants to participate in her community. One recent project A Trip Back in Time teaches people about traditional Indian art techniques. The first thing she taught was terracotta, a traditional pottery technique practiced in Bengal (3). Her students learned how to make small handmade pots and figurines. As well, they experimented with Kantha (4), a south Asian sewing technique. This technique is used to reduce waste by turning unused textiles into thicker blankets and jackets. The materials are sewed together using a running stich to create a new textile. For this project they bleach dyed materials before layering them into quilts. Mohar also works as an education assistant for Calgary Board of Education. Her job involves working with special needs students and teaching them art.

Mohar is having her first solo exhibition in July 2023 at Seton Library in Calgary. She is showing a new series called The Vintage Collection that features a series of window paintings. As well as her solo exhibition, she is also hosting a second exhibition at Signal Hill Community Library where she is showing her own work as well as work from five of her students and some pieces from an Indian community art project. Her goal is to give exposure to these students and to local Indian artists to try to make the art scene in Calgary more welcoming. Mohar's journey as an artist and teacher is just beginning, and her hard work and dedication to her students and community continues to inspire those around her.

Based on an interview by Ayshani Aurora in 2023

References

1. “Arts Commons (Formerly EPCOR Centre for the Performing Arts[1]) is a multi-venue arts centre in downtwn Calgary, Alberta, Canada, located in the Olympic Plaza Cultural District.”
Wikimedia Foundation. (2023, May 24). Arts Commons. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arts_Commons

2. “As the city’s designated arts development authority, Calgary Arts Development supports and strengthens the arts to benefit all Calgarians. We invest and allocate municipal funding for the arts provided by The City of Calgary and leverage these funds to provide additional resources to the arts sector. Our programs support hundreds of arts organizations, individual artists, artist collectives, and ad hoc groups in Calgary.”
About. Calgary Arts Development. (2022, December 6). https://calgaryartsdevelopment.com/about/

3. “Terracotta Art is the earliest form of plastic art in which the Bengal artists excelled. The art products in terracotta or burnt clay satisfied the creative impulse of the artists and also met the domestic and ritual needs of ordinary man. Clay objects were either baked in the sun or burnt into terracotta for hardening and durability and were used by man in his daily life since pre-historic times.”
Chowdhury, S. (n.d.). Terracotta art. Banglapedia. https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Terracotta_Art#:~:text=The%20art%20was%20practised%20in,notable%20ones%20are%20the%20plaques.

4. “Originally made from old, recycled fabrics, the traditional kantha cloth is an example of ‘flat’, or unwadded quilting, worked on multiple layers of fabric. Bangladeshi or Bengali kantha cloths were made by women for use in their own homes as bedcovers, mats and all-purpose wrappers. The stitching consists of embroidered patterns, ranging from simple floral motifs to elaborate scenes, combined with running-stitch quilting in a colour matching the background fabric.”
Kantha – a South Asian quilting tradition · V&A. Victoria and Albert Museum. (n.d.). https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/kantha-a-south-asian-quilting-tradition#:~:text=Originally%20made%20from%20old%2C%20recycled,mats%20and%20all%2Dpurpose%20wrappers.