



Artistic Canvas in the Business World

Art and painting comprise his big motivation and the adrenaline rush he gets in transforming his vision into canvas makes him more and more convinced that he was born with painting in his blood. Known for deploying art in his creative strategy, Shombit Sengupta, is an internationally renowned artist-painter of Gesturism art and a brand strategist who has done designs for over 2,000 corporate brands around the world. Called Sen in the West and in the fine arts world, Shombit has literally brought his artistic canvas into the business world and has become part of the haute-couture of strategic brand design. In an exclusive interview with *Corporate Citizen*, Shombit talks about his art, his early days and how he deploys art in his creative business strategy to create breakaway industrial designs and brands

BY RAJESH RAO

You have done designs for over 2,000 corporate brands around the world. From being a painter how did you enter the design and branding profession?

First and foremost, I am a painter. By default I became a designer. I have never studied any applied art in any art school, my studies have always been fine art. So entering the design profession was for my livelihood necessity when I was young. Design was my response of the logical requirement I had of feeding my family. In my heart, mind and soul I have always remained a painter.

Rarely did I get a brief from my client for each of the brands I have created or renovated. Clients always ask me what visionary direction I can bring for their brand for its long term sustainability and which can bring in profitable returns. That is why my focus has always been end-user centricity. Only if the customer reaches out for repeat purchase of the brand, will that client get returns. So, by anticipating the customer's latent needs a brand can sustain for the long term.

Every branding exercise has huge process and a system to follow it up in a continuous way. I have seen that whichever client followed the customer centricity blueprint of the whole brand

strategy I have given, they have mesmerized the market with high profitable returns for themselves. Also those who did not take customer sensitivity as strategic vision, they had to suffer. Branding is only one part of the story; how you consistently engage in brand management is the key. And most significantly, a brand cannot be a brand without meshing together the organisation's people, product development and the point of purchase.

What encouraged you to be a painter? Tell us about the inspiration behind your paintings?

Picasso had said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up." I started drawing from age five and I have continued drawing and painting ever since. It's the only thing that inspires me in life. Art and painting comprise my big motivation to look forward to the next minute. You have a canvas of a determined size. But the vision you can translate into it is never determined, that's in your own hand and mind. The adrenaline rush I get in transforming my vision into canvas makes me more and more convinced that I was born with painting in my blood.

Tell us about your early life in Kolkata (where you were born) and then going to Paris at the age of 19, to realise your dream of becoming an artist and get into the domain of art?

My family had to flee their affluent home in East Bengal during India's turbulent partition in 1947. They landed penniless in Shohid Nagar, 60 km from Kolkata, in a slum-like refugee camp without electricity, sanitation or drinking water. My mother was the only breadwinner in our joint family. Her primary school teacher salary of ₹40 per month was only enough to buy rice. As we were on squatted land, municipality people would come tomtomping with a drum to declare that unless we paid taxes within a given time, our mud houses with thatch roof would be destroyed. We had no money to pay. This made me feel unstable and rootless. I secretly wanted to go away somewhere else.

I remember being stifled in the classroom. Instead of rote learning and number crunching, I'd escape with paper and pencil to draw nature. The spinning potter's wheel captivated me—hands that animated clay dolls, idols, shell bangles or carved wood kept me rapt. Shubinoy Uncle, a neighbour at the electricity supply office outside



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PICS- SHRINING CONSULTING

INTERVIEW

Shombit founded his company Shining Consulting in Paris in 1984. Shining's international clients include Danone, Nestle, Total Petroleum, Renault, Valeo, Galerie Lafayette, Carrefour, Unilever, Adidas, Delta Dairy, P&G, Cartier, Pernod Ricard, Reckitt & Benckiser, Bic, Remy Martin, Horosmart among others, and Indian clients include Wipro, Britannia, Jubilant, M&M to name a few

our refugee camp, had graduated from Kolkata Art College. He taught me how to draw and paint. He was my role model but he discouraged me from art saying there was no future in art.

My father was a Communist party leader. He used to hate the British Raj, and influenced me to learn how France was the world's first radical society. Just crossing the Hoogly river from our home, I'd escape into Chandannager, the erstwhile French colony. I had still not been to Kolkata or seen the British heritage there. Chandannagar became my place of dreams. The historical French museum, the library, broad, tree-lined avenues along the river bank and buildings, was so different from my refugee camp. This was the bait that ignited my yearning for France.

How did you move into the advertising world and become part of the haute-couture of strategic brand design?

I never liked advertising because it does not have legitimate creativity. It is a wind of make believe

that passes on. Advertising is a collage of multiple elements with no unique character. Although I say that, I endorse that advertising is extremely required for communication of the brand. When customers watch an advertisement, they don't spend any money. This is free information for them. In the current situation of digital proliferation, communication has to be relayed in the product itself for delivering its functional and emotional benefit.

I see advertising as corrupting of a collage of multiple elements to achieve the objective of satisfying the client's brief. On the other hand, design is a touch-connect to the masses. Design helps in the end-user's decision making to spend money on the brand. I like this contact very much. You will find today that at least one or two products designed by me are used by people in Europe, the US, Argentina, Japan, China and India on an everyday basis in their lives

Tell us about your Emotional Surplus

Delivery through a Creative Business Strategy and Implementation and how it can provide value beyond the customer's expectations?

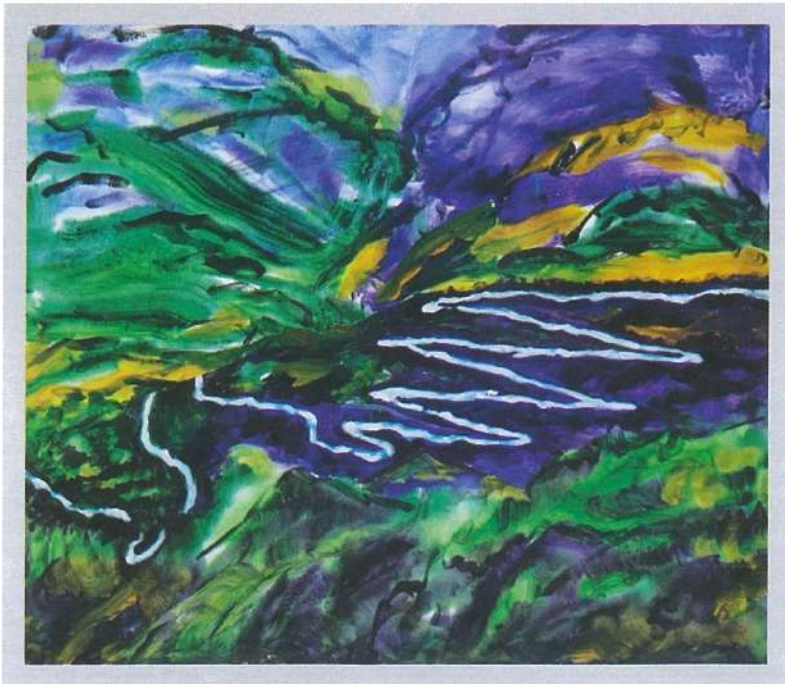
A brand has to sustain year after year by killing the newcomers that come in with new technology or the competitor's challenge. So repeat purchase is a big factor. If a brand cannot deliver surplus value to the consumer in every circumstance, then it is not a brand. To do that, let me repeat that the mesh of the company's people, product and point of purchase becomes the key factor.

Another key is a product's RFE factor that I have developed as a process. This is a benchmarking tool that measures the potential and worth of a brand in its competitive scenario. R stands for the rational factor which measures invisible quality. F stands for the functionality of the product, its usage advantage and E is the emotive quotient where look, likeability and feeling for the product comes into play. When you scientifically segregate the RFE factors of the product to benchmark whether it is superior to its competitors, then go back to work on it so it beats the competition in the consumer's perception and experience, you will know that you are on the winning post surpassing the customer's expectation. This is the emotional surplus design that sustains.

There is an interplay between design and business strategy. How do you help companies innovate contextually, together with your art?

I have literally brought my artistic canvas into the business world. My design concept has always been very much driven by artistic form. It is totally opposite to regular design which is more geometric and applied art graphic centric. For example, if you see the rainbow flower of Wipro, it's a piece of art. If you compare it with any other in the IT service industry, you will find nobody has this approach, they are all very geometric graphics. The Saffola bottle design visual I did has a sculpting emotion of a joyful heart to get rid of the oily character of the oil bottle. So I can say with Saffola oil people use a "piece of art" in their kitchen. But I will not compare these works with my painting as these are all reproductive industrial work. A message has to be passed because functionality is important for the commercial purpose of selling. Here there are some constraints for pure art. By default these designs may have artistic form but I cannot consider them as real pieces of art. But in my painting canvas and drawing, every piece is a piece of art. What I have done for Renault Kwid is an extreme piece of art.

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functional benefit to the user. Without functional benefit a design has no meaning. A sculpture cannot be a design because it has no functional benefit. But when a designer has the fine arts grip in hand, he/she has the advantage of more freedom to express design in an extremely creative way to differentiate in the crowd of competition.

What role does design strategy play in helping companies integrate design with brand?

Real worth of design: The first contact any end customer has with a product always goes through design, either visual design or industrial product design. In the competitive environment a brand plays in—the end-user connect to the brand is the first key point. How well the product can deliver functionality with high expression of beauty to increase the end user's value of life is the real worth of the design. So if a company wants to make profitable business it should go with a brand; this is the key necessity of the enterprise. A brand solves the purpose to retain an end user's spend and repeat purchase.

The big factor to make brand a success: For the trading business, a brand is not needed. Unfortunately, India is a country of traders where most products only address the demand led market. Indian industry has still not understood how to create demand in the market. This is a big deficiency. When people try to lure customers by pronouncing something is cheap, already they have destroyed the brand. Indian industries do not give credence to the mystic element a brand has. The big factor to make the brand a success is to ensure that the inherent quality of the product and service is better than the competitor at any given time. This matter of quality is what Indian companies do not understand or pay attention to.



Indian companies do not invest to build a brand. **Making of a great brand in Indian market:**

The heterogeneous Indian character of inclusiveness is undoubtedly extremely spiritual and has priceless value. But this value cannot create the brand. The brand has an intrinsic discipline of its performance. In its evolution, the brand's performance has to move faster than the consumer's expectation. It is quite amazing how religious leaders in India have really understood that the Indian type of branding by the big corporations here does not have any extra added value. So if you are a spiritual baba who is well known in the market you can sell a brand. This is a hollow way of considering a brand. A brand can be used by heterogeneous people but cannot be conceptualised by a heterogeneous discipline. A strict discipline of the company's people, product and the point of purchase has to be harmonized by digging the content of human social life. Every successful brand in the world will have some sort of additional value of being inventive power. That's the way a brand becomes a great brand.

Can you tell us about your new art style creation called Gesturism Art?

Gesturism Art is a creative celebration of the limitless gestures of all living beings, from birth to death. My colour palette is Indian, my inspiration is France where I grew up since my teens and where I conceived Gesturism Art. Gesturism Art is purely based on the artist's handmade craftsmanship free of manipulative digital art. It is boundless energy in human conduct, alive, impromptu and unpremeditated, dynamic and awash with essential pulsations. It provokes us to take on challenges, and implement the shock of the difference to make an impact which can sustain. My Gesturism Art encompasses paintings and

'désordre' installations.

Can you explain your concept of 'désordre' installations using Gesturism expressions and what it represents?

'Désordre' installation art is probably like no other art piece in the world because here I invite the public to physically touch my set of canvases within my given theme, to recompose it any way they want to. They can even unscramble it to find the original painting I did. Gestures of viewers touching the art make it non-static, endowing it with life and movement. As each canvas can move 360 degrees, collectors can even regularly change canvas placements to see the same painting in different perspectives, even in totally abstract form.

The impact of India, the world's most heterogeneous society, is what gave rise to 'désordre' in me. Since ancient times, migrants from Greece, Africa, Central Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Europe and more recently the British arrived to mingle into India resulting in the creation of extreme diversity and physical, unpredictable disorder in every aspect of life. In spite of that, India's values of love, affection and inclusiveness are highly treasured among the multiple cultures where every single reality is interpreted with different visions.

Why do you call your Gesturism Art as an artistic revolt against digital virtual art?

Gesturism is human touch creativity to always unearth something new in movement and dynamic form. It's my way of imagining creatively to differentiate from the indoctrinated world of trick after trick in every aspect of life. I don't consider digital art to be a pure art form as it is reproductive by nature and happens through the pre-programmed operating system of a digital device. It is technical centric and is not a single piece of creativity, rather it is duplication and reproductive.

Among digital artists you can compare who has better skill in handling the computer system but the output cannot be compared with real art form of modernism or contemporary art. That's why when I see that an exhibition mixes modern art with digital art, I avoid entering to see the art. digital art distorts human craftsmanship. By itself, it could be a reflection of social trends.

Gesturism art is totally anti-trick and spontaneous. Beyond painting and installation art, Gesturism can be extended to society in different creative aspects such as documentary film and photography without preparation, industrial design, poetry, impromptu theatre acting and visual design. A feature film cannot be Gesturism because it is tricky and pre-determined in every aspect. In fact Gesturism Art has to have impromptu impact.

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