



## In Conversation with Amir Butt

by Shanzay Subzwari

*A look into the seasoned art collector's abode, where he displays his impressive collection of art.*

**Shanzay Subzwari:** Since when have you been interested in art and when did you begin your art collection?

**Amir Butt:** I've been buying art since the last twenty years. The process started off slowly and steadily. That was more of a learning period for me, where I was carrying out research. But I went on a buying binge in the last couple of years. In the last two to three years, I have bought many works, especially in the last year and a half since Sanat Gallery opened up. I have bought entire collections, as well as half of the shows of certain artists.

**SS:** What draws you to the pieces you buy? When you buy art pieces, is there any particular theme/idea/execution that attracts you towards it?

**AB:** Well firstly, the work should speak to you – you have to fall in love with it. The process of 'dialogue' should be there between you and the piece. And especially if you're buying something very expensive, you have to see the artist's career. Art has become a very serious investment – you cannot miss out on that aspect because you're putting millions of rupees into it. If you're buying an established artist, you don't need to do that kind of research, but you have to pay through your nose. On the other hand, if you're buying an emerging artist, then you have to see how serious and committed they are, whether they will continue working, their future prospects, etc.



Collector Amir Butt.



Amir Butt in conversation with Shanzay Subzwari



To make these decisions, I take everyone's advice: my artist friends, gallerists, fellow collectors etc. Basically any subject, including art, is like an ocean – you learn about it till your grave. And this process should continue.

**SS: Do you make spontaneous choices when collecting art, or are you carefully planned in your decisions?**

**AB:** Both. I am spontaneous as well, but I do consult people around me, as mentioned before. I value the opinion of people who are close to me. My desire is always to buy the best pieces, the pick of the litter – which, of course, is a matter of opinion. Different people will like different pieces.

Contemporary art is a difficult subject; you don't know much about it until you're immersed into it. Thing is, the art of today isn't just beautiful paintings; there are so many ideas and subliminal messages behind them. You have to know the artist, his mind-set, his history and how his process led to this kind of work. So unless you are deeply involved in this world, contemporary art does not necessarily move you. Funnily enough, many people still question the kind of paintings I buy because they don't understand contemporary art.

**SS: What are your most prized pieces from your collection and why?**

**AB:** I am proud to own Muhammad Zeeshan's biggest artwork, which is a triptych of about 21x5 ft. The story behind this painting and its acquisition is also quite interesting. As far as I'm concerned, I focus a lot on Khadim Ali, Muhammad Zeeshan, and Ali Kazim, and I own a number of their pieces.

**SS: What is your most recent acquisition and what led you to collecting this particular work?**

**AB:** My recent acquisition was the 15 foot long train by Idrees Hanif shown at Sanat Gallery, a piece I fell in love with. Before that, I bought Numair Abbasi's entire collection from his solo at Sanat Gallery because I was greatly impressed with his work. I feel a rebellious attitude is best. One should push boundaries, create doubts, and agree to disagree in life, as well as in their work. I like artists who take risks.

I buy art from, and have a good relationship with most galleries in Karachi. Up till now, whatever Abid Merchant (owner of Sanat Gallery) has been doing has impressed me greatly, with respect to his work and personality too. In such a short time, Sanat Gallery has upheld a great standard with regular shows, all of which have held me in awe.

**SS: Can you tell us a little about the way you have displayed the pieces you have bought, and how you decided on that?**

**AB:** This was an incredibly intense process that took months. It is a combined effort by Muhammad Zeeshan, Abid Merchant and myself; we put in time and effort into visualising and deciding placement of the pieces. This, too, is a skill, a speciality. One should be able to place work in their house such that each piece has breathing space, otherwise bad placement can kill an artwork.

My display, which is on both floors of my home and spans many rooms, will keep evolving. I have bought many new pieces that have yet to be delivered, so things will be shifted around. It is an ongoing process.

**SS: When buying art, what are the factors that should be kept in mind?**

**AB:** I think I mentioned much of this in response to the second question. But, in short, one should love the piece since it becomes part of your life and family; you ultimately live with it. Secondly, one should really see the artist's potential, as this is a serious investment. Research is really important, especially when buying expensive work.

Buying art is often a gamble; bubbles burst, and an artist's value can go down. But often, even if one artist whose work you have collected becomes a star, the multiples are so high that you are compensated. Look at Waqas Khan – he has become a star in the last few years, and will now be showing alongside Anish Kapoor! His value catapulted in such a short time and his works have hit the \$100,000 mark. I would love to buy his work.

The beauty of art is that there is no straight answer or fixed rule for anything in this field. Anything can happen.

**SS: Any plans for further adding to your collection? Any particular artist or kind of art you would like to collect?**

**AB:** I have a solid ambition: to be a phenomenon like Charles Saatchi in Pakistan. He was like a nuclear explosion in the global art scenario, and changed it in the last fifty years or so. I want to put wings on new talent and push them to the next level. If I am able to contribute towards that, I'll be very proud of it.

The thing is, with respect to the art scene, everyone has a role to play. Apart from teachers, mentors, gallerists, writers, photographers who document art, and of course, the artists themselves, collectors play a very important role in artists' careers. That's because by investing money behind the right talent, they give them a boost, as well as a signal to other collectors who also often get interested. Thus, collectors often become trendsetters and trailblazers.



I am impressed with many young talents whose works I have also collected, like GM, Mohsin Shafi, Hami Kay, Numair Abbasi, Zahid Mayo, Farhat Ali, Maria Khan, Qadir Jhatial and more – they have shown great promise. I have played my part in pushing them to their potential. The collector puts stakes on work, thus influences the gallery and the artist too. All these entities draw inspiration from each other.

I want the artist to be proud of being part of Amir Butt's art collection, which I call my 'Sonya Amir Butt collection (SAB)', named after my wife. I hope for it to be one of the biggest contemporary art collections in Pakistan.

**SS: What advice would you give to emerging art collectors with respect to the experiences you've had with art collection?**

**AB:** Art collectors should start buying what they like as per budget, and take it slowly and gradually. Art collection is a time-consuming process that you learn with the passage of time. You win some, you lose some. Initially one should begin with a smaller budget, and once they gain confidence, they should move on to acquiring expensive pieces too. Thing is the market is speculative, so one should keep taking advice from other collectors, galleries and artists.

Collectors should seek wisdom from wherever they can get it. The art community is small, and many people share common interests so one can be guided.

**SS: You recently began your stint as an art writer. How is that going for you, and has your experience as an art collector aided the process of understanding and writing about art in any way?**

**AB:** I suppose art writing was a natural extension for me. I'm into reading extensively, and my ambition is to write a novel – a work of fiction. My room is full of books regarding various subjects: fiction, history, poetry, philosophy, art, etc. I read a lot, mostly global classics, such as Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, Boris Pasternak, Shakespeare, etc. I am particularly into Russian writers. I have literally confined myself to my room in the past, to read certain books.

I deeply believe that I am an artist from within; I didn't go to any art school but there is a fire inside me. I do paint – I call myself a Sunday painter, and I am also greatly into reading, so writing on art came naturally.

[The poet and philosopher] Jaun Elia stated, "Those who are writing, they should read first". It is very important that a writer should be well aware of art history as well as extensively know about living artists. That's the only way forward. I suppose writing also came naturally to me as I constantly interact with artists, many of whom are my close friends who often spend the day with me.

**SS: You have an extensive collection of pieces. Can you name some of the artists?**

**AB:** Besides those already mentioned above, I have works by Old Masters such as Chughtai, Bashir Mirza, F.N. Souza, Sadequain, Ahmed Pervaiz, Khalid Iqbal, Iqbal Hussain and Nagori.

Contemporary artists include Anwar Jalal Shemza, Adeel-uz-Zafar, Rashid Rana, Faiza Butt, Irfan Hasan, Naveed Sadiq, Amra Khan, Saira Wasim, Akif Suri, Rabeya Jalil, Mudassar Manzoor, Meher Afroze, Noorjehan Bilgrami, Sajjad Ahmed, Jamil Naqsh, Mona Naqsh, Waseem Ahmed, Nurayya Sheikh-Nabi, Fazal Rizvi, Wasif Afridi, Fahim Rao, Imran Channa, RM Naeem, Wardha Shabbir, Salim Mansoor, Irfan Gul Dahiri, and Muzammil Ruheel.

I also have foreign artists' works, such as by Michael Kempson (Australia), Pala Pothupitya (Sri Lanka), Hojat Amani, Mohsin Kiyani and Abass Akberi (Iran), and Gopal Kalapremi Shresta (Nepal). The list goes on.

**SS: To you, what is art, and what is its importance?**

**AB:** A scholar said that as a nation, we (Pakistan) are producing, on a mass scale, clerks, salesmen and technicians – and hardly any thinkers. The greatest service by the head of state of Muslim nations would be to close a few science and technology institutes, and open institutes for liberal arts, painting, poetry, music and the likes. The Renaissance started as an art movement that opened the mind of the European people, and also provided the tarmac for science and technology to take off, which, I feel, is needed here. Look at Leonardo da Vinci – he was foremost an artist, as well as an inventor, mathematician, architect and scientist, and all these achievements went hand in hand.

Pervez Hoodhboy – the Pakistani nuclear physicist and essayist – mentioned that our nation concentrates on creating 'hafiz' in every field here. There is too much emphasis on rote-learning. Even many of the PhDs here are not genuine because their research is not their own. The thing is, we don't question anymore, which is why we haven't progressed. The next generation has to be encouraged to debate and inquire, and to push boundaries. We have become so straight jacketed, that there is 'regimentation', as Virginia Woolf said.

It is art that allows people to push boundaries and think outside the box, and it also holds a mirror to society, which is why it is so important.

**SS: Thank you for your time! It was great talking to you and seeing your beautiful collection.**

**AB:** Pleasure.

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Photo credit: **Jamal Ashiqain**.