

Art is the best form of expression - no boundaries or stigmas should be associated with the medium.

And that is precisely what can be said of designer Vibhor Sogani. A graduate from what's considered the temple of contemporary Indian design - NID, Vibhor through his work has attested that creativity is truly boundless and a designer solely should be instrumental in deciding its scope.

His studio, since its inception in 1994 has dabbled in several sectors and designed products, trophies, exhibition spaces and now he has gradually ventured into art installation space.

Largely known for his surreal looking lighting collection, Vibhor unabashedly pokes holes into the nation's structured commercial sector and presents creative variants.

His fascination with metal is not only present in his product lines but also reflects in his installations. It would be totally justified to say Vibhor has a gift for alchemy where creating awe-inspiring art is concerned.

Here, he talks about the lack of recognition for art in India, his future aspirations and his desire to resurrect dwindling Indian craft.



VIBHOR SOGANI

my space

Interview by Shweta Salvi

Could you walk us through your journey from choosing design as a profession to finally setting up your own practice?

My journey started after my schooling in Jaipur. Despite being a very good student studies never excited me. A session with a career counselor and an aptitude test later, I was told my 3D imagination is good and I could do well in a creative field.

In 1992, I graduated from NID with a degree in Product Design & Industrial Design. After that, I worked for a year with the furniture division of Godrej in Mumbai. Though I did get wide exposure and experience, working with industries could get creatively restricting.

So in 1993, I moved out and took up freelance projects which somehow weren't easy to come by. Finally in August 2002, I launched my collection of table top accessories under the label Studio Vibhor Sogani.



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Till 2005, I was involved in my accessories line; somewhere down the line I realised this stream was far too commercial for my creative sensibilities.

Fortunately, in 2006, I got an opportunity to do some work in lighting. The response to that was encouraging at various levels. My lighting portfolio started growing and as a designer I felt more satiated and involved.

In terms of competition also the segment was more specialised. There were lesser people in my category from the Indian subcontinent and that allowed me enough room to expand.

In 2007, I was invited to do an art show and in March 2008, I did my first solo show - God & I - an exhibition of wall arts and installations, done in stainless steel and other materials.

This show was liberating - I was doing this for myself and didn't have the stress of charting its functionality. The shift from design to art was an internal struggle for me. But I did have an advantage as I was technically equipped.

My focus is now on these two verticals. As an artist, I like to feel involved...Every day I look forward to not doing a business deal with someone but having conversation with like-minded individuals.

What is your biggest strength as a designer which also helps you in life, in general?

As a designer what helped me was the struggle that I went through. Typically when a person steps out, you work with a company and dedicate about 5-7 years to it. That's the normal practice. I broke away early and that gave me grass root exposure.

I did a lot of hands-on work - sat with the welders and craftsmen to guide them through my designs. Had these modern day technologies come in earlier, we could have made designs on paper. That exposure helped me grow as a designer, stay rooted and simple.

As Gandhi says - "May I live simply, so that others may simply live" - this is what I learnt, live simple, live beautiful. It has helped me immensely in life today. You can give me a complex project it doesn't rattle me anymore because I know it can be broken down to the basics. So I know,



when a client walks in through the door I am not under pressure, I am up for the challenge.

Our nation has been blessed with diverse crafts and techniques and yet Indian crafts have not seen remarkable design highs. What should be done to empower India's rich craft culture?

This is in fact a very serious issue. Culturally in terms of talent we're very strong. It is said that in a family of craftsman, it takes three generations to kill the skill from your system, post the third generation it tapers off.

The new generation of these craftsmen wants to make money, they want to be

in the city, be a part of the IT boom. Somewhere down the line, they would of course do well monetarily in the city, but the impact will be on our country and culture.

It's a big loss, which we as individuals realise but are incapable of dealing with it. This issue involves each one - the individuals and the country as a whole. The contribution has to be at each and every level.

Unfortunately, the help the crafts sector gets from the government is ineffective or very little. The institutions, ministries and offices involved are probably not doing this the right way.

For example, in Indonesia, they have something called the 'Craft Trail'. It's a trail that covers a few villages and takes you to the backyards of these craftsmen and shows you how crafts are made. It's part of their tourism.

Other countries have gone all out to promote their crafts. The furniture from the Far East has been in vogue for the past ten years. Where is our talent? Our talent is way better.





What's gone wrong is that, while we've always had the talent, the skills have to evolve to cater to new needs. Design intervention is not happening. The craft needs to become a little more functional.

In today's age, one doesn't need a decorative piece in the corner. They want their chair to become decorative. They want things that they use and yet be beautifully crafted.

Life has become more minimalistic today. Our resources are being underutilised. Italians, given our resources will become world leaders in this segment. They'll immediately make a product coupled with our talent for today's world.

Design intervention at the grass root level is needed. Expecting a craftsman to come up with a design which is suited to the urban environment is itself a fallacy. Somebody who understands the international scenario, architectural scenario, the urban scenario needs to be brought in. Marketing the product is a different story.

Can you name one craft, which is underexplored, and you would like to work on it?

There's a craft called damascening from Udaipur. It's a beautiful craft that involves amalgamating two or more irons. Layers of different metals are put on one another, beaten and forged. It gives such beautiful textures. There are very few families in Udaipur working on it.

Talking about design, modern India is slowly waking up to the possibilities that can be explored within this realm.



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What will it take to instill the idea of good design being a practical and aesthetic requisite for all objects and classes?

Multiple things are happening. With the internet, extensive travel, people in India are already waking up to it. It's not like we really have to make any efforts to make them realise the value of design across the board - from accessories, furniture, to public works.

The good part is people want better products, good technology and this awareness is nicely trickling down to the tier III cities. They're already up and alive on this subject. In fact, fifty percent of the people who come to me are from Ranchi, Indore and Bhopal.

Their knowledge base and demands surprise me. They are very categorical with what they want. It's a matter of designers meeting clients. There's a gap there: people want great designs, but they don't know where the designers are; we want good clients but don't know where they are.

That connect is missing apart from media and shows that do bridge that gap, given the size of our country, given the number of designers in the market, this is a problem. However, I do feel in the coming decade, we will see a lot of change.

A material you find is difficult to work with but would love to explore anyway?

Steel is a very tricky material and I am working with it already. Dealing with steel requires a lot of technical knowhow. However, I would love to work with concrete too someday.

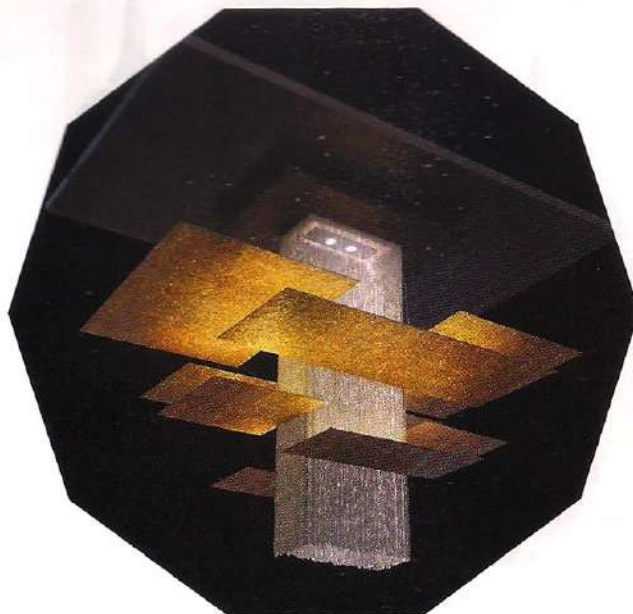
Is there a person or a medium (not related to design per se) that has inspired you in some way?

Honestly, I have no idol. I look for inspiration from various tangible and intangible sources. In terms of medium, steel has inspired me, which is why I'm here.

Talking about designers, Anish Kapoor is inspirational because the scale that he works with is monumental. I also find Richard Serra who essentially works with iron, exceptionally gifted. I can connect more with his language. Yes, I admire both of them.

From having a statue to commemorate a public figure at every square to now gradually moving towards accepting public art installations, India has come a long way. What role according to you does public art play, apart from its aesthetic novelty?

I don't agree that India has come a long way. Public art in India is lacking big time. Yes, there are statues at every square and that's what is limiting. Again in this case, connect is missing.

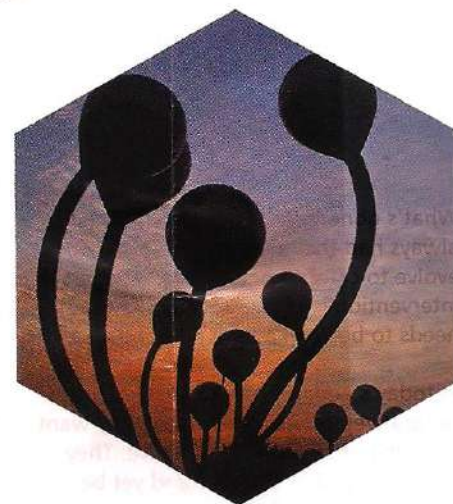
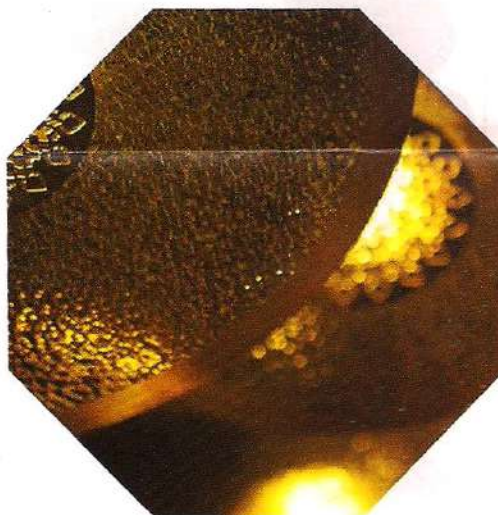


There are industries that are willing to sponsor and there are spaces that want installations, so why is it not happening? When it comes to installations, even an artist won't charge his regular fee.

This is an issue that needs to be addressed. The public wants it, companies are willing to sponsor it and artists are dying to put out their work. Given the amount of opportunity, the art we see is negligible.

What are you currently working on?

Besides working on my regular projects what is keeping me excited is a series of works that I'm preparing for a show, and if all goes well a solo show is also on the anvil.



Your design portfolio has steadily multiplied and diversified over the years. What exciting ventures should we look forward to from your studio?

We actually plan to enlarge our collection, not just lighting but beyond that as well which would include accessories and furniture. Practically speaking at this point in time, I'm focusing on expanding my lighting portfolio and reaching out to a wider market locally and overseas.

When not designing, what do you enjoy doing?

I am currently dabbling in organic farming. I'm reading about plants, trees and the technicalities of farming. I've just finished up ploughing my patch of land and soon will start sowing.

✉ www.vibhorsogani.com