

The French encounter

CHISEL TALK

by Suneet Chopra

LIFE in the Capital has become so superficial that no aspect of our being remains untouched. The unipolar world with the market as its goddess has everything in its embrace. I noted it in 'Wounds' and now I reiterate it for the exhibition on our artists' memories of France, at Rabindra Bhawan. A hurriedly or carelessly put up exhibition cannot hide the fact, like a man with a black eye. And no amount of steak helps to clear it up.

The present exhibition, with the names of a number of our luminaries of the art world scattered all over the catalogue in various capacities, reminds one of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*: "Not all the perfumes of Arabia..."

Indeed, some of the vital perfumes were missing. I can think of at least four: Akbar Padamsee, whose studio I visited in Paris as a young man; Damyanti Chawla whose memories of France exist as striking landscapes which I saw in her studio in Delhi recently; Himmat Shah, whose precision and logic matches the best that France can offer in the field of sculpture; and Kamola Roy Choudhury whose every line reminds one of the Paris of Picasso and Braque.

It would appear that the ideology of the supermarket has taken over. Top brand names, presided, not all, but just the available ones: S. H. Raza, Ram Kumar, Akkittam Narayanan, Anjolie Ela Menon, Paritosh Sen. Then those who have their own particular set of buyers: Sakti Burman, Madhoor Kapoor, Haridasan, and Laxman Pai. Talented young artists like Probir Gupta, Bhagwan Chavan, Kanchan Chander, Ram Lal Dhar, Valsan Kollerli, Kavita Nayar, Ashok Prajapati, to name but a few. So, anyone with a shopping basket would have quite enjoyed the journey with a trolley, picking a can here and a packet there...

Yes, to put it bluntly, the exhibition lacks perspective. And to make a virtue of necessity, a well-known French critic was marshalled to tell us: "Today there are no more 'masters', no more 'leaders', no more 'schools', just individual artists". Looking at the present exhibition perhaps one can say the same. But should one be content with it?

Each work has something or other to be said about it, but the mixture is almost unpalatable. A number of works appear to have been picked up from certain galleries and have nothing to do with France or memories of it; just as a number of works at the "Wounds" exhibition had nothing to do with communalism or countering it. It is enough to be seen at the supermarket to be known as a commodity.

OBVIOUSLY, a number of artists have consciously

chosen not to be part of the Supermarket Culture. Not because they did not find their study in France memorable, only they did not want their genuine memories to be swamped by elements that had nothing to do with them. This is a perfectly laudable sentiment and one can sympathise with it. But needless to say, few can resist the temptation to exhibit *anywhere*, without reflecting on the damage it does to an artist's image to be part of such a hotch-potch.

However, it appears we live in desperate times when an artist—even one who sells well enough—feels his bouquet must flavour every *pot-pourri* available. And naturally, this approach will force artists to create immediate and striking works that flash be-

In a sense, I found Mohan Kumar's wooden sculpture the most powerful image to express the essence of this encounter. It shows a roughly hewn figure clutching its dream girl; almost as if it were afraid she would dissolve. This is the nostalgia of lost empires on the one hand, and the reconstructed past of the colonised that Fanon describes as black men with white masks, on the other. Here both Havell and Abanindranath Tagore share the same ground. The one seeking an image that does not exist and the other trying to approximate to it.

Surely such encounters are outdated, just like Tipu's encounter with the France of the Jacobins is, in an age when the revolution is a dinner party. To-



MOHAN KUMAR'S SCULPTURE

fore the eye and are gone, while their serious work lies buried in Provence, or Santiniketan or wherever, waiting to be dredged out as part of an archaeological enterprise. But this is no longer necessary, for there are galleries enough in the country today to get every worthwhile artist a good solo show once a year at least. No one needs an excuse to show work that might not see the light of day otherwise.

If you want to see the influence of France, or memories of it, it is not in the photo-realist study of the Sarojini Nagar fruit sellers of Madhoor Kapoor, but in dreamy works on psychedelic ones he abandoned before his *Archaka* series. Valsan Kollerli's French sojourn has gifted him with amphora-like shapes in terracotta, draped in bronze seaweeds, mosses and lichens. And may be, France might share with our own revivalists, a little bit of the blame for exotica of the neo-tantric sort; and of course, colour-based abstract art.

day, if anything, France and India must meet on a give-and-take basis as countries who will have to resist the growing standardisation of cultural expression "with an American sauce", as the German film-maker Maetzig described it. And we must learn to pick up what is best of each other.

WHAT we can learn from the French experience is that mere individual originality does not pay, without the background of profound social concern — from Voltaire to Rousseau, to Fourier — not to speak of the Paris Commune. It was this tradition that drew the finest minds of Europe and the world to France. I cannot say the same of the France of Pompidou or Le Pen, whatever the plumes they choose to deck themselves in. And what can the French learn from us? Sycophancy never pays — a lesson we have failed to learn despite repeated experience of it.