

# RAZA'S RENAISSANCE

at 88

*After spending 60 years of his life in Paris, the legendary Indian painter S H Raza wants to return to India where he can peacefully breathe his last. **VIRESH VERMA** unravels the success saga of the art virtuoso*

**T**HE FIRE in him still smoulders as the master of abstraction enters the 88th year of his life. Age may have etched on his face but has not bogged him down in expressing his creativity on the canvas. "I am not at all tired of painting but the fact is that this is what keeps me going at this age. Afterall, my work is my own inner experience and involvement with the mysteries of nature and forms which is expressed through colour, line, space and light," reveals the iconic Indian painter.

Raza, who has spent the last 60 years in Paris, has been regularly visiting India and feels that essentially he's an Indian citizen and his roots are still intact. "Despite my hectic schedule and commitments, I make it a point to visit India every year for two months.

I choose one state for this trip which then becomes the focus of my paintings and this year I am focusing on Rajasthan. I am looking forward to the whole experience."

Raza feels India has shoved aside several 'talented' artists over the years,

which are at par with their counterparts in the West. "Look at Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-Gil – unfortunately she died last year, Maqbool Fida Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar and the new crop that includes Manish Pushkale, Sujata Bajaj,

*'When, I am painting, I don't think of money or investment but I do it in search of a positive art expression'*





## DELHI CELEBRATES RAZA'S 88TH ANNIVERSARY

**D**ELHI'S ART connoisseurs turned out in full strength when poet and chairman of the Lalit Kala Academy, Ashok Vajpeyi, hosted an exclusive showcasing of Raza's latest art works and to celebrate his 88th birth anniversary in the capital. "Raza saab is a gem in Indian contemporary art and it's a privilege that he's here with us on his birthday. His contribution is indescribable in mere words", quips Vajpeyi who is known as an authority on Raza's work. An audio CD was also launched on the occasion which has a recorded autobiography by Raza himself. Other prominent art aficionados who graced the evening included Satish and Kiran Gujral, Vishnu Nagar, Rameshwar Broota, Sunaina Anand, politician Vasant Sathe, Manish Pushkale and several others. ♦

Akhilesh and Seema Ghuraya. I think we have made immense progress in the domain of contemporary Indian art. It is considered very seriously the world over and it is progressing in a very important way; in fact, it is doing quite well. But still, the new-age artists need to take art and life more seriously," says the guru of modern landscapes.

Further, he goes on adding, "The works of artists in America and Australia have been hugely influenced by the works of Indian artists which is much evident in their art these days. I have been staying in Paris for the last 60 years but it's India that reflects in my work."

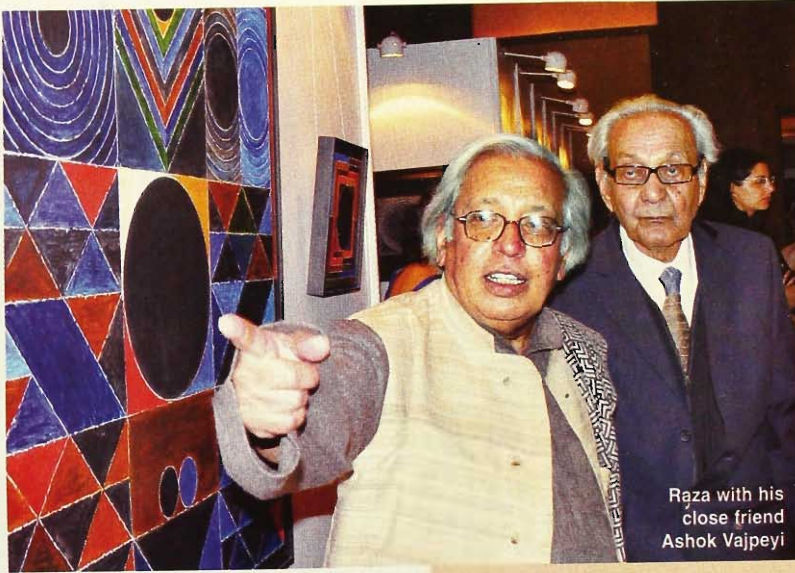
Raza's evolution from a painter of landscapes to the master of abstraction has garnered a lot of prestige and fame for him. "Well, I had three different transitional periods in my life. Firstly, I had to discover myself as an artist, which happened in Nagpur, Bombay

and few of my early years in Paris. That was the period when my eyes were really opening towards the important elements which are necessary to make a painting. Second period was in France, where I gave myself to paint landscapes because that's my



Raza cutting his 88th birthday cake with Delhi's art connoisseurs





Raza with his close friend Ashok Vajpeyi

passion and I painted landscapes in a modern manner. I loved painting European landscapes, especially those of the French countryside. It earned me recognition across the globe and I showed everywhere, but I was not happy and now you'll ask me why," said Raza blushing. "It was in 1985 that I said to myself – Raza, you have become a French painter! And then, for twenty more years, I made a constant effort to bring Indian iconography in my works. It meant bringing *bindu*, *prakriti*, *kundalini*, *naga* and *panchtatwa* all together in an Indian way, which was very important," recalled Raza, pondering down the memory lane.

Further, explaining his evolution from a landscape painter to an expressionist and finally a master of abstraction and profundity, Raza adds, "I inked my acquisition with Indian art which took me 15-20 years and gradually, these elements became a part of my work and then these paintings were

shown all over the world. These are the ones that got me a lot of acclaim and prestige and made me happy too." But then, why did you go to France? "I went to France because that country taught me the technique and science of painting. The immortal artists of

## BEING RAZA

- Recipient of the *Prix de la critique* award in Paris in 1956 (first non-French artist).
- Awarded the Padma Shri in 1981 and Padma Bhushan in 2007.
- In an auction in Dec 2006, one of his paintings was reportedly sold for US \$1.4 million (one of the highest in abstract art).
- Recipient of Kalidas Samman by the Madhya Pradesh government.
- His 1985 work *La Terre* fetched a whopping 720,000 pounds (\$1.4 million), creating a record at Christie's.

France like Cézanne knew the secret of the construction of a painting, an aspect which is weak in Indian painting. But despite my French experience, the substance of my paintings comes straight from India," answers Raza.

Raza got rave reviews for one of his art works that created a record in an auction in 2006 when it sold for \$1.4 million. But the master turns philosophical when queried about commodification of art. "It is unfortunate that this feeling is in the minds of innumerable people, both in India and Europe, and it should not really be the purpose of art lovers and the artists. If it's a quality work, it would certainly be acquired. Like for me, when I am painting, I don't think of money or investment but I do it in search of a positive art expression," clarifies Raza whose art works have often broken the records at prestigious global auctions.

Last year, Raza was deeply disappointed to find fake paintings being displayed at an exhibition of his early works in one of the capital's oldest galleries, Dhoomimal Art Gallery. "I think it's very unfortunate that an artist spends 30-40 years to finish his work and someone replicates this in just 3-4 years. All artists must have copyrights on their works. We have filed a case. Such people should be condemned, punished and should be taken to task", feels the highly acclaimed contemporary Indian artist.

Raza has turned 88, but still he has loads of plans for life, his work and the art world. "I am scouting for land in Delhi for a permanent art archive that would showcase artworks of legends along with a house for music, poetry and literature. I also want to disclose that I have decided to come back to India, where I can peacefully breathe my last because India is my country and my love; as Ashok Vajpeyi says in one of his couplets *Maa Lautke Jab Aayunga, Kya Aayunga*," quips Raza as he signs off. ■

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