



# A SPLASH AT 86



PRAVEEN KHANNA

From the forests of Barbaria and the bucolic pastures of France, Sayed Haider Raza has moved on to a more abstract palette. Indian iconology, especially, the acclaimed *bindu*, is a focal point of his art. The renowned artist made France his home but India and its various symbols remain an integral part of his art. On his annual sojourn to India, the master speaks about his life and times

■ VANDANA KALRA

**Congratulations. You just turned 86.**

Yes, but I still feel like a child. It has been a fruitful journey, though I wish that my wife, Janine Mongillat, was with me to see the success.

**You still paint a lot.**

I'm painting all the time. Even when I'm traveling, I ask people to get me canvases and paints. Sometimes I wake up at two in the morning and feel the urge to go and see my half-finished canvases.

**How is it to see your old works that often surface at auctions and exhibitions? Recently your work *Encountre* sold for Rs 3.1 crore at an Asian auction.**

It's nostalgic and I'm happy that people are willing to pay so much for my works. However, despite the whopping figures at auctions, I haven't exorbitantly increased my studio price to a level where it is out of reach for individual purchasers who are genuinely interested in art.

**A collection of your serigraphs was also recently exhibited.**

That was precisely to make sure that everyone could afford my works. Those who can't buy a canvas can buy a high

quality serigraph. Each work in the series was chosen by me and some of them, like *Maa Main Kab Laut Kar Aaunga* (inspired by Ashok Vajpeyi's poem), are my favourites.

**You painted a lot of expressionist landscapes but the *bindu* has become synonymous with your art. What is the origin of the *bindu*?**

The *bindu* is the centre of creation and existence, progressing towards forms and colour as well as energy, sound, space and time. It is the supreme generating force, which symbolises the seed that bears the potential of all life. My association with the *bindu* goes back to my school days, when I was just seven. I was a very weak student and to improve my concentration, one day my teacher drew a *bindu* on the wall and asked me to keep looking at it till he returned. The practice continued for a couple of days, as he thought this would help concentrate my energies and thought. Years later, I thought of the *bindu* once again. But my teacher would certainly not have thought that it would have such a lasting impression on my mind.

**From your native village of Barbaria in Madhya Pradesh, you moved to Nagpur in the pursuit of**

**art and then to the JJ school of art in Mumbai. How was it to be a student at JJ School in the 1940s?**

My experience at JJ School was disastrous. The course at that time was essentially western and principles of realism dominated the academic curriculum. We could hardly relate with it and the Progressive Artists Group was precisely a reaction to that. We wanted to find our own calling, create a path for ourselves. Fortunately, most of the artists from the group, from FN. Souza to M.F. Husain, did well for themselves.

**You went on a scholarship to study at the Ecole Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1950 to 1953. In what ways did France influence your art?**

I wanted to be a part of the vibrant art movement in France and worked towards getting the scholarship. I even studied French. Going to Paris actually worked well for me. I travelled a lot and captured the landscapes on my canvases. The decision to stay there was both professional and personal, as my wife Janine was a French artist.

## ON RAZA



"Raza saab is a master colourist. His works may look simple but he manages to bring a marriage of colours in them. They evoke several emotions and instill positive vibrations. Of all his works, I adore the abstract landscapes."

—Sunaina Anand, director of Art Alive, publisher of *A Life in Art: Raza*

"My association with Raza goes back to the 1940s. He is an artist who is traditional as well as modern. He has transgressed the business of time and his creative sense of colour is unmatched."

—Krishen Khanna, artist



**But you continued to visit India.**

I'm still close to India and have a deep relationship with the country. Indian philosophy has given some of the most important lessons, including *shanti* (peace), *satya* (truth) and *ishwar* (god).

**What was the idea behind the SH Raza Foundation that you instituted in 2000?**

The aim of the foundation was to recognise young talent through an award, which includes a cash prize. People are always in search of young artists with potential and I hope to help them through the foundation. It's also good if the artists are recognised at a relatively early stage of their career. Most of the recipients, like Sujata (Bajaj), Manish (Pushkale) and Yusuf have proved their mettle.

**When is the Kala Kendra near Delhi coming up?**

The project is already underway and we have almost decided on a location on the outskirts of Delhi. Manish and Akhilesh will also be involved in it. The museum will have my collection of miniatures apart from contemporary and modern art. Art workshops and seminars will also be held at the venue. I'm also getting my primary school in Damoh, Madhya Pradesh, repaired. The last time I visited the school, it was in a dilapidated condition. This structure was very close to me and I hope to have a room to display art works there.

**How do you look at the controversy that erupted last year when you expressed your desire to donate part of your art collection to Gorbio village in France?**

The negotiations are still on. I intend to donate 140 works from my personal collection—20 will be my works, 23 are of Janine's and 25 others will be precious works by Indian and French artists. The remaining will be sculptures, woodcarvings and miniatures. The controversy is over how the works should be displayed. The people of Gorbio have bought a tower in a 12th century chateau and have re-done it while artistically retaining its old world charm. The authorities say that they will display only half of my works at any given point of time, but I want them to keep the entire art collection together.

**You have received several awards and accolades. Which is the closest to you?**

I've always cherished the Prix de La Critique that I received long ago. It got me a lot of recognition. Recently, the Indian government honoured me with the Padma Bhushan. Moreover I also feel honoured with the interest shown in my work and the several books written on me. ♦