

The Arts Films



"Woman ruled France, the Revolution dethroned her"

The age of frivolity, superficiality and flattery made Nattier a favourite portrait painter. He believed that if dress makes a man, undress makes the woman.

by Jayshree Sengupta

THE age of Louis XV marked the beginning of France's influence on European art and was the age of elegance, style, artifice and lighthearted gaiety. The formality, coldness and grandeur of Louis XIV, the Sun King, was discarded in order to usher in the style known as Rococo. (The term Rococo was coined by the marriage of the word *rocaille* which signified the rocks at Versailles and *coquille* — the French word for seashells.)

The arts were presided over by the tastes of Madame de Pompadour who was eager to please the king suffering from ennui. She commissioned paintings to distract him and entertain him.

Francois Boucher suited her taste exactly, with his palette of colours which were like "rose petals floating in milk." He discarded Mars and Jupiter for favour of Venus. He was quick to abandon the grand style of his master Francois Le Moyne and classicism. On a trip to Italy he found Raphael "trite," Caracci "murky" and Michelangelo "hunch backed." Instead he painted pink bodied women emphasizing all the dimples and curves against landscapes which were unreal to the last leaf. He probably



VENUS CONSOLING LOVE: by Francois Boucher.

was the inventor of the pin-up. One young model Louise O'Murphy was so enticingly painted by him that the king took her as the first boarder of his private harem at Parc aux Cerfs. Denis Diderot, the encyclopaedist, philosopher and art critic, said of Boucher, "He is the most deadly enemy of silence I know" and "I daresay this man has never known truth."

But Boucher's qualities of flow-

said in his favour that he was painter to a woman who had a garden full of porcelain flowers sprayed with perfumes to brighten up the winter.

He was a ceaseless worker who designed sets and costumes for the opera, provided cartoons for tapestries woven at Royal Beauvais factory as well as at the Gobelins. He provided motifs and models to Madame Pompadour's favourite project — the Royal Porcelain Manufacture of Sevres. He even painted paper puppets. Boucher's designs and motifs were copied in plaques on cabinets, in porcelain and on little gold boxes which became the rage during Louis XV's reign. The largest collection of about 800 boxes belonged to Madame de Pompadour. The little gold boxes were carried by both sexes, more for display than for actual use and were considered as the indisputable sign of good taste. He also included Chinese motifs to satisfy the desire for the exotic and it set the fashion for Chinoiserie.

Nymphs In Tunics

The Rococo motifs that emerged from Boucher's art were of two types — arabesques in the shape of the letter C and others which twisted and twirled in long S shaped swirls. The decorative forms were taken from shells, reeds, rocks, foam, waves and other aquatic themes — even the colours had pearly tones of deep sea blue, shell pink and seaweed green. Rococo motifs influenced the designs of little objects, paneling and furniture.

The age of frivolity, superficiality and flattery made Jean Marc Nattier a favourite portrait painter. He believed that if dress makes a man, undress makes the woman. Noble ladies were portrayed as goddesses and nymphs and in short tunics, adorned with rose garlands, sometimes airborne, feeding birds. The plain daughters of Louis XV got their

portraits painted by him and people said that if he could make them look so pretty, he could do wonders to any woman. He prettified and stereotyped all women so as to make them look almost alike. Perhaps he too was portraying the age where fashion and style made women put on an idealized mask.

The age however was most poetically captured by the painter Jean Honore Fragonard who was Boucher's pupil and who lived long enough to see the French Revolution. When he went to study in Rome he was warned by Boucher, "If you take Michelangelo and Raphael seriously, you are a lost fellow." He did not unlearn Boucher's technique nor his palette of pastel colours. He possessed great versatility and switched from happy family life scenes to naughty pictures of furtive embraces and stolen kisses. But Madame Pompadour was dead and tastes were changing. He managed to get the patronage of the luckless Madame Du Barry, the last of King Louis XV's favourites and who was to die at the guillotine. She was interested in boudoir paintings with themes of love and shepherds. But the progress made by Fragonard was slow as she constantly interfered with his work. She finally rejected the paintings but Fragonard who was attached to them kept them till his death.

Fragonard's most famous painting "The Swing" made to order for a lovesick baron captures the spirit of the age of frivolity. Pushed by a bishop a young girl tosses off her slipper from a high swing while her lover seated below swoons in ecstasy. Even the surrounding foliage and the misty background is befittingly frilly and lacy.

All the excesses of fantasy and frivolity of the Rococo came to an end with the French Revolution. Fragonard was forgotten but for the grace of Jacques-Louis David who ruled supreme as the painter in Neo Classical style. He had once been under Fragonard's influence. Fragonard was made a member and soon the president of the Museum Commission. He died in 1806 from a stroke which struck him while eating ice cream. A strange end indeed. With him died the age of giddy delights. It was said quite rightly of his era, "Woman ruled France, the Revolution dethroned her."

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"Colour is not just a rip-off"

and blown up the human form. "After all," stated Sabavala, defining his new direction with immaculate precision, "the har-

VOTIVE is the word that came to mind as I looked at Jehangir Sabavala's latest canvases, scheduled to be on display at the Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay from November 15 to November 21, and at the Calcutta Art Gallery, Calcutta from November 27 to December 6.

Sabavala is exhibiting after three years of reflective gestation and he offers us a devout, somewhat prayerful, painterly chant, celebrating the human figure. He seems to have gone on an inward journey through his earlier landscapes of cliff, sky, cloud and sea and enlarged

dwelt, unduly defensively I thought, on the absence of a dramatic change. "It is a substantial but not a radical change," he said.

Gradual unfolding, gentle progression, the imperceptibility of organic growth and studied exploration — these are as valid as full-blown, instant change, frequent switches of style, the swift onrush, the leap into unplumbed depths. It is a matter of artistic temperament, that much maligned phrase. A canvas is a painter's legitimate playground. He can throw a tantrum, wildly gesticulate, indulge in acrobatics; loom, recede or fade away. All statements, if sincere, will communicate the truth and beauty of the artistic experience.

In his struggle and search for man, Sabavala has discovered his own treasure-chest of colours. Colour is a whole mode of ex-



Purdah 1



The Fledgling



The Monks

pression, "not just a rip-off on red or yellow." I could not imagine Sabavala in a rip-off of any sort. His world is mannered, ordered, tidied. No room for accidents here, none at any rate that have not been processed into careful design. There is, in this series, a soft explosion in hue and tint. The controlled flush of orange, the held-in iridescence of green, the warm sheen of brown, lilac spread with petal softness. The paintings are brimful of fresh colour discoveries. It is as if the clear light of a breaking day has picked out hidden hollows of colour in a hitherto sombre palette of greys, blues and dusky violets.

'Whispered Intimations' was the first break-through. It was taking shape on his canvas three years ago when I interviewed him for a feature. Two women turn to each other, standing free of the landscape, their whispered words, if any, held in a mysterious ochre suspense.

There are clearly discernible motifs. The mentor, for instance. In 'The Disciples' the novice has his eyes and mind held secure in the grip of a guiding guru. In 'The Sacred Grove' the banyan frames a forest fraternity in search of primal mysteries. It is the forest, the aranya, of the Mahabharata. J. R. R. Tolkien, echoing with Om or a Druidic chant. In 'The Monks' enlightenment breaks out of its

confining cave, the guha, in a burst of laburnum gold, as the monks stare ahead into the prospect of liberation.

Purdah I, II and III raise an age-old issue — the insidious shackles of a protected world, the harem. The pink sandstone of history; the walled garden beyond, a green and verdant trap; the women under house arrest, so to speak. Aware, but barred exist. Beauty captive but the beast not growling.

A Girl Is Born

In Purdah II the fact stares us in the face, starkly grey and black; power that is growing unheeded like the strength of Samson. The mottled brown of Purdah III holds the warmth of a rich promise, a keeping of faith. The purdah, both veil and curtain, shutting off and hiding, will one day be a free flowing, billowing drape rather than a smother, a suppression; and the waxen pallor of a harem complexion flush living crimson.

Two studies stand clear of the slightly oppressive weight of these feminine statements, capturing girlhood and burgeoning femininity. A girl is born, they seem to say, and will bloom no matter what no matter where. The butterfly will spread wings to the sun and briefly, gloriously live. 'The Fledgling' with eyes inviting, sensuous, braided hair heavy with

promise; in 'The Rose,' the veil signals to hidden treasures, the rose-red dew of youth.

It felt like a processional march, a self-conscious, ceremonial where the characters play out their appointed roles, meticulously directed by the master of ceremonies, Sabavala. The interview had a unique quality. Here was an artist, highly articulate, anxious, even over-anxious, to lead me into accurate verbal perceptions. Needless, I must say. In Sabavala, the art of painting has been ordered through finely honed craftsmanship to a distinct and decipherable vocabulary. There is no code to break. It speaks out in the clear voice of form and colour; shade and line, planes, perspective and composition form a language that is neatly phrased, punctuated and carefully orchestrated.

In a lesser artist these elements may have banished the necessary ambiguities, the light-edge of vision. But Sabavala handles it all with infinite care. Highly mannered and deliberate, he peoples his world with the beauty, grandeur and austerity of truth rather than its terror. As we absorb Sabavala's statement on life, we stand warned but never threatened. It is an invitation to live in joy and full awareness, in hope rather than despair, with restraint rather than wild abandon. It is an affirmation, not a rejection, of faith if you like.

Every year about two hundred and fifty poets, from over forty countries, participate in this unique international poetry event.

by Madhu Upadhyay

THE international poetry festival, held annually in Struga (Yugoslavia-Macedonia), is the most important poetry event in the world. The festival is held in honour of the Macedonian educators of the XIX century, the Miladinov brothers.

The younger brother, Konstantin, is considered to be the

Sessions of sweet silent thought

creator of contemporary Macedonian poetry. Dimitar, the elder brother, was a folk literature collector and revered teacher of the first poets of Macedonian romanticism. The ancient town of Ohrid is idyllically located on the eastern coast of the lake, has been a crossroad for many civilizations and a major, cultural centre through the centuries.

The poetry festival takes place every year in the second half of August and lasts for six days. Four days in Struga and Ohrid, one day in the towns in Macedonia and the last in Skopje, the capital of the republic, where the festival ends with the poetry meeting.

Every year about two hundred and fifty poets, from over forty countries, participate in this unique international poetry event. So far over 2,000 poets, literary critics and essayists including such luminaries as Wystan Hugh Auden (USA), Pablo Neruda (Chile), Eugenio Montale (Italy), and Eugene Guellevic (France) have been honoured with the Golden Wreath — as outstanding names in poetry.

The Indian participation in the festival this year, was highlighted by the Award of the Golden Wreath to eminent poet S. H. Vatsyana — "Agyeya" and a highly appreciated reading and presentation by leading Oriya poet, Sitakanta Mahapatra. Ma-

hapatra's was the only Indian paper, among thirty three, presented on the theme "poetry between dream and reality".

Later, speaking about the festival, Sitakanta Mahapatra, whose major work, *The Awakened Wind* — the oral poetry of the Indian tribes, has recently been published by Vikas, stated that Struga is an experience no poet can miss.

The festival has a carnival atmosphere and rich and vigorous poetry recitation tradition, very similar to our mushairas and kavi sammelans, but on a much larger scale and with more popular participation.

Each poet is presented with a bouquet by traditionally-costu-

med Macedonian girls, while the poet himself wears his/her national costume. The poetry is read in the poet's language, (a language in which one can dream) and simultaneous translations are rendered in major international languages. A large audience, and in fact the entire populace of several thousands, watch and participates in the proceedings and helps build a poetry bridge between nations.

The Struga poetry festival opens and widens the roads of mutual acquaintance and brings together poets, poetries and cultures of the world, as well as people who long for love, solidarity and peace. The Macedonian and Yugoslav poets are ideal hosts for this unique gathering of poets from all over the world — "a gathering that represents a great poetry holiday and the greatest poetry working day."