

Reflections of Indo-French experience

By P N Mago

It is too well known that the bumper of modern art throughout the world owes its debt to the art movements and trends developed in Europe during the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. And Paris, the 'Mecca' of art in Europe till recently, had been the main centre for diffusing such developments. Paris had been attracting artists from all over the world; and a large number of painters and sculptors from the East — China, Japan, Korea and India too — have been converging at Paris since the beginning of this century to enrich their art experience.

In India, however, as perhaps elsewhere in the East, the question of innovation revolved around the controversy and experimentation on the advisability and means of drawing on the experience of Western painting. Though at the same time, the consciousness about the decaying traditional values had been growing, the trend in the early decades of the century (gaining momentum in the formation of Progressive Groups in the 40's) point towards the then existing belief that contemporary Indian painting can only be improved by adopting the approach of Modern Western art. Since then the upsurge of 'Indo-Western fusion' or revitalising the so-called static indigenous traditions through 'syncretism in accordance with the principle of freedom of thought' has been continuing.

'Soyenirs d'en France', an exhibition of paintings, sculptures and prints by over 40 Indian artists of varying age groups who represent multifarious trends in contemporary art, provides a unique scope for observation of the European (particularly French) influences in their works. The exhibition has been sponsored by the Embassy of France in India in collaboration with Lalit Kala Akademi and assisted by Association Francaise d'Action Artistique, Paris.

All the artists represented, except a few, have either been living and working in France or have received training in French art institutions. Surprisingly, the exhibition — though a pleasing collection of nearly 70 works, mostly paintings — does not seem to be a complete enough representation of all important artists who have imbibed French influences. For in-

stance, Amrita Sher-Gil, who was one of the first Indian painters to have gone to Paris to study at the Ecole de Beaux-Arts during 1929 and 1934, is not represented. The reason, as we were told, was that the exhibition only presented works of the 'living' artists. But some of the important living artists, as for instance Krishna Reddy, Akbar Padamsee and Himmat Shah are also missing.

Nevertheless, there are quite a few artists who lend substance to the show, including S H Raza, Viswanathan and Shakti Burman who have contributed their bit of Indian sensibility in the growth of contemporary art.

Others who studied in France for a year or more on French Government scholarship include Luxman Pai, Anjolie Elia Menon, Paritosh Sen, Ram Kumar, Akkittam Narayanan, S R Bhushan, Jogen Chowdhury, Sunil Das, Laxmi Dutt, Amitabh Sen Gupta, Anju Chowdhury and Ashok Prajapati. Some others who had been there on a fellowship for a shorter stay include K V Haridasan, Narendra Srivastva, Suraj Ghai, Khemraj, Rini Dhumal, Kanchan Chander, Kavita Nayar, Valsan Kalleri and Jayashree Chakravarty. Yet, some like Shail Choyal, Brahm Prakash and Ram Hari Jena are among

those invited to participate in the painting festival at Cagnes-Sur-Mer.

The influences of modernity came to the contemporary artists to see the world objectively through the French experience. It was Cezanne who wished to see the world, or that part of it he was contemplating, as an object, without any intervention either of the tidy mind or the untidy emotion. The experience initiated by the single-minded determination of this French painter generated the manifold trends in the modern movement in art, which very specifically means the form-giving power of the intellect, the intellect moved by aesthetic emotion.

What is observed in the works on display is not only the French influence i.e. the cubist, the abstract and the sophisticated decorative such as seen in the works of Ram Kumar, Narendra Srivastva and Khemraj, but also the expressionistic and the abstract expressionistic influences as in the works of Jogen Chowdhury, Sunil Das, Valsan Kalleri, Jayashree Chakravarty, Kanchan Chander and Kavita Nayar. The most significant observation, however, seems to be that some of the senior artists who have chosen to live in France, are feeling a

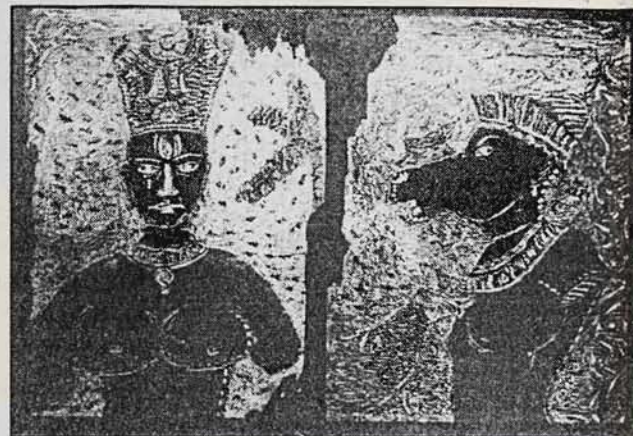
nostalgic compulsion for creating works having an Indian flavour! For example, the works of S H Raza, Viswanathan and Akkittam Narayanan, who clearly show a return to the conceptual or structural geometric form and colour. Their round, square and triangular shapes denote particular archetypes contained within a geometrically defined space. Shakti Burman, in his own way, retains a certain nuance of Indian spirit. Unlike the painters, the sculptors hardly show any such nostalgia. The work displayed not only shows the influence of Cezanne, but also of Picasso, Derain, Matisse, Seurat, Miro, Dufy and even Munch.

One phenomenon of far-reaching implication in recent times has been that quite a few students returning from art courses abroad have tried to revert to traditional art, though perhaps changing their style to Indian painting. Their achievement so far, of course, is rather naive.

However, Indian art in the hands of the artists benefiting from the French experience — from the delicate rhythmic line of the traditional Indian art to the re-emergence of representationalism; from the imitation of nature in Western art to the expressionist subjectivism of recent times — seems to be simultaneously progressing as a result from the self-regulating counter-phenomena and the result of inter-linked osmosis and mutual influences. There are, of course, those who predict, along with the growing frequency of modern human contacts and the ever more pervasive artistic mix, the emergence of 'world art'. At least, given the close kinship between the two systems, it seems that there will be a strong tendency to combine different artistic values which may profoundly effect the destiny of Indian painting.

There had been proposals and practices of this kind from the time of the Bengal School to the endeavours of Janini Roy and in re-establishing the vital forms of folk and primitive art-forms. But, as it seems, the present-day young painters in India have practically shown no effect of these directions. But, whether the wholesale admirers of the alien art forms would eventually return to tradition in a full scale, it is yet to be seen.

It is no wonder that young Indian artists should raise the banner of wholesale Westernisation when, all said done, the nourishment of art in India is still being derived from Western



Painted graphic block by Kanchan Chander

art. The vast psychological domain of traditional art will, in all likelihood, sooner or later, pull them back to differing extents which inevitably, in the form admixture, will lead to a transformation of the tradition.

A great and ancient people like ours cannot just rest on its laurels; we must travel arduously into the future with the resolution to absorb all that is excellent in any alien culture without hesitation. But we must not lose our own ground.

This, perhaps, has been one of the signal experiences in the gradual development of Indian painting and culture in the last half a century. The persisting Western influences and the changes in Indian art over the past decade or so show that social conditions are being created for an approach to pluralisation. This implies a pluralism that contains diversity in at least three aspects—diversity of artistic outlook, diversity of school and style and diversity of forms and means. These apparently, encroach upon three domains, but by reversing their order of precedence we can surely arrive at three layers of artistic freedom from the shallow surface to the inner depth.

If we may say that the works on show are not too French, they are not Indian either. For, there is little Indian sensibility that we can observe. It means that one misses the appreciation and rendering of those shades of feelings and nuances of thought which are the peculiar products

of Indian history and Indian environment. The do not represent any cultivated styles of painting which can be described to possess an Indian aesthetic context. But, then, there are no ready-made forms to render these shades and nuances.

Indian painting, however, is quite capable of retaining the conceptual quality along with the realism or surrealism or of pursuing self-expression while exploring abstract and semi-abstract expressionism as co-existent competitors. In the wake of ever increasing forms in artistic expression in the West, which we are intimately in touch through exhibitions of foreign artists in India and India artists visiting abroad, we, perhaps, cannot blossom without a fundamental pluralism of artistic outlook. Modern India, unified, extensive and also open, cannot claim a flourishing of the art unless there is a maturity and co-existence of various schools and styles. Under the circumstances there is no scope to remain to the age of isolationist, rigidly stylised art.

Contemporary Indian art has to be a graphic expression of Indian mental and visual world and not inherently a matter of particular form or tools or techniques. There is really no need at all to greet Indian painting done with new tools and materials with exclamations that this destroyed its material character. The present-day Indian art can have its own flavour as long as it is a reflection of human nature as an artist's subject rendered in national aesthetic sensibility.



Painting by Ram Hari Jena

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Herald photo

Mr Philippe Petit, Ambassador of France, with sculptor Mohan Kumar (left) at the inauguration of Souvenirs d'en France, an exhibition of works by nearly 40 Indian painters and sculptors who have lived in France, at the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi on Friday.

French envoy opens art exhibition AC

Herald News Service
NEW DELHI, April 16 — 'Souvenirs D'en France' an exhibition of paintings, sculptures and prints by 43 Indian artists, was inaugurated here today by the Ambassador of France to India, Mr Philippe Petit, at the Lalit Kala galleries.

Hailing from different parts of India the artists belong to multifarious schools of art. But they have a common bond; all of them have lived in France at one time or the other. Though some returned to settle down in their homeland, many, like Ms. Laxmi Dutt and Mr Mohan Kumar have made France their home.

Reflected in the 73 works on display is the Indian culture finely interwoven with the French flavour, that the artists seemed to have picked up during their study and stay in that country.

Inaugurating the exhibition Mr Petit, said the exhibition had been rightly named Souvenirs D'en France which translated into English as "memories of France."

The former Union Minister and chairman Lalit Kala Akademi, Mr Ram Niwas Mirdha said it was a special exhibition, perhaps the first of its kind, "that has brought diverse schools of art under one umbrella."

The display for the weeklong exhibition had been conceived by Mr Skall, a French painter. The exhibition had been jointly organised by the French embassy and the Lalit Kala Akademi.

Two paintings by Madhoo Kapur, collurtl, rather photographic scenes from Indian life whow the artist does not like to tamper with the real life material. A departure from his earlier imaginative works.

Shail Choyal, known for his Rajasthani miniatures, has put up a collage in the vibrant colours of his home state. Rajasthan.

Laxman Pai's drawing, reminiscent of his famous series on "seasons" based on poet Kalidas works if colourful. Perhaps an experiment after the etchings, water colours and oils that he did in his earlier period.

Mohan Kumar's sculpture from the roots of tamarind trees, felled to make the East - coast road from Kanyakumari to Calcutta, is his way of environmental protection, the artist said.