

AR



Painting a film

By Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni

ON June 27, the Alliance Francaise screened a film called "Paris-Inde, Huile sur Toile (meaning "Oil on Canvas"), 1955-1985" which was made specially for the Festival of India in France by a number of official and semi-official organisations there.

The occasion was the release of the monograph called "Raza" published by Chemould Publications and Arts.

The film has been scripted by Raissa Padamsee and Patrick Cazals and directed by Cazals in the true tradition of a topical documentary. It focuses on four major Indian artists: Raza, Krishna Reddy, Ram Kumar and Akbar Padamsee. All these spent their formative years in France—specially Paris—and two of them still work there.

The film begins with an image of the artists' first days in Paris collecting a crate containing their canvases at the main railway station. The painters gathered for this are Raza, Padamsee and Ram Kumar, all of whom will show their work at the Festival of India in Paris.

In a taxi-cab the three go over their early experiences: How they were fascinated with the Paris museums and how they lapped up the various legendary exhibits. They remember their surprise at realising that Cezanne's "Card-players" was such a small painting when they had actually imagined it as covering an entire wall (having seen it earlier only in reproductions).

The first artist to be presented in the film is the well-known sculptor, painter and graphicist, Krishna Reddy. He lives in New York but returns regularly to the Atelier 17 in Paris. With him we catch a glimpse of the Cafe Select where, during the 50's gathered all the avant garde artists: Giacometti, Braque and many others. "They were the best years of my life", says Reddy.

A thrilling moment occurs when, with Reddy, we visit the studio of the sculptor Zadkine, who had long ago been his mentor. Zadkine helped Reddy to free himself, to simplify his technique, not to make it more complicated.

Then we have a long and session with Reddy as he works on his graphics in his atelier, creating textures simultaneously using two colours, one a rich red and the other a dry, flat blue. We also see

him making drawings. He makes as many as 600 or 700 drawings before applying colour.

Before Raza is introduced, he pays a brief tribute to Amrita Sher-Gil whose photographs we see on the screen and whose works had featured in a leading show at the Festival of India in Paris. In his Paris apartment on Rue de Charonne, Raza says that he went round the museums without a catalogue or a guidebook. He wanted a "direct confrontation" with the painting.

We then move to Gorbio, the little town in the south of France where Raza works during summers. It reminds him of home, with nature and the elements all around. (There is a beautiful full moon in the sky.) Raza's canvases bear

was struck by the desolation and painted them all grey. In his work, Ram Kumar often uses black for death and white for life and achieves an orchestration between the two.

Lastly, we have Akbar Padamsee working in his Juhu studio. We first see him preoccupied with his bronze heads (many of which were recently exhibited at the Pundole Art Gallery and at Art Heritage in New Delhi). According to him, "sculpture has to educate the eye, to deepen the penetration, to rediscover "the gesture" "which multiplies the dimensions."

We see the artist going to the foundry where his heads are being cast. The locale and the men are picturesque, lending extra texture to this otherwise



Padamsee and Raza in Paris during shooting of 'Paris-Inde'

witness to the feeling that there should be rapport between man and nature. They are for example, called "Night", "Rajasthan".

We also see paintings in the famous "Bindu" series, redolent of Indian mysticism and handled with deep insight by the painter.

After Raza, the next painter we see is Ram Kumar. We see him juxtaposed against his Delhi background: The mosques and the bazaars and the barsatis. While neighbours feed pigeons or fly kites, Ram Kumar works doggedly in his barsati studio at his paintings.

In the course of his talk, Ram Kumar mentions his Benares paintings, how he

Paris-based film (much like the Delhi scenes from the Ram Kumar segment). We also see him drawing with Chinese ink from a nude model. And finally we see him going to the market to buy fish or vegetables like any other average citizen.

The quotation which winds up the film is from Akbar and it is revealing: "When you have a room where you can pray (he says about his studio in Monparnasse to which he returns again and again), a certain atmosphere reigns therein; my studio is like that. It is in the studio that I work, where I have resolved so many problems. The moment I enter I feel ready to create".

Chemould Publications and Arts' monograph, "Raza", which was also released on June 27, is a wonderfully well printed and designed book. Raza has been a Chemould artist for a long time, and it was but natural that the gallery Kekoo and Khorshed Gandhi should bestow all the affection and expertise at their command on the production of this monograph.

However, the book only covers the years following Raza's departure for Paris. None of the Indian writers who write about him for example, Ashok Vajpeyi and Mrinal Pande had known him during his early Bombay days. (I did!) Those were the glorious days of the Progressive Artists' Group of which Raza, together with Francis Newton Souza and Ara, was a founder member.

In those years (1946 to be precise), we didn't have the Jehangir Art Gallery—which came up in 1952 after Souza had departed for London and Raza went to Paris on a French Government scholarship. Raza was a struggling artist in Bombay, having freshly got his diploma from the Sir J. J. School of Art. (He gave most of his exams from Nagpur where he was a student in the late Mr Athavale's School of Art).

Raza's water-colours use to be influenced then by the work of Walter Langhammer, the expatriate Austrian whose shadow loomed large over Bombay's art world. Langhammer was not only a skilled landscape and portrait painter himself working in a sort of impressionistic style but was also art director of "The Times of India". His brush strokes and his colours were to be found echoed in Raza's water-colours of Bombay streets (for example, Flora Fountain) Washed by the rains.

Paris changed all that completely. And from 1955 onwards, while he was living in Paris and rarely visiting India, Raza's growth was phenomenal. He started coming here fairly recently and was honoured by his native Madhya Pradesh Government more than once.

The monograph records these years of maturity faithfully and vividly, with many colour reproductions of his work.