

Cite Du Couvent on Rue de Charonne in Paris was originally built in the 17th century and functioned as a convent for nuns. After the French revolution, it became residential quarters. On its second floor, the Indian painter Sayed Haider Raza has his studio and apartments: one in which he has his studio and lives with his French artist-wife Janine Mongillat; and the other, which Janine uses as her studio. Trained in the painterly values that Paris offered and belonging at one period of time to what is known as the Paris School, Raza has moved decisively towards a more rooted vision, which has imbibed *le sens plastique* and reinvented it with many Indian ideas. It has blossomed into something uniquely Raza, an inclusive vision whose alchemy now supercedes the merely French or the specifically Indian.

Raza's studio is difficult to describe. Apart from part of the floor cluttered with colour tubes, brushes, cups, other odd instruments as also white stretched canvases of many sizes on the easels, the rest has racks of books. There are books on art, Hindi and French poetry,

catalogues, etc, piles of journals and invitation cards from the Pompidou Centre, Maeght Foundation, a working table with watches, one of them constantly showing Indian time, a Shiv *lingam*, some Jain miniatures, a conch shell, a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi, many Ganeshas in bronze, a wooden statue of some *devi*, a sketch by Pablo Picasso, a little temple in the corner, some posters on the wall, poetry books by Kabir, Tukaram, Majaz, Rilke, and Rimbaud. On the table, there's a phone, on the side table a fax machine. Every morning before Raza starts work on the canvas he meditates and prays — invariably a few lines of Rilke in French translation, "To catch the continuous message which emanates from silence". And sometimes a wish: "Let God take away everything but not this fever of the soul."

On the sofa set, on which Raza also takes his afternoon nap, we sit and talk in mid-June 2001. It is all too often interrupted by phone calls and faxes. Apart from friends, collectors from San Francisco, New York, Berlin, Mumbai, and Chennai call for new paintings. Raza is polite but firm — he thanks them but invariably expresses his inability on grounds of slow work. Sometimes, young NRI couples land up in Paris to book works by him in advance. He is appreciative of the gesture and respects their vulnerability to his work, but he's unwilling to do much business.

He wishes to conserve all his energy to do the kind of work he wants to, unconcerned with money, market or fame.

Raza, in his ultimate phase, has taken to a poetics of simplicity, intensity and passion. He is forever celebrating being in colour. There is unmistakable humility rooted in confidence and competence. The painterly aesthetics and the spiritual concerns meet in consonance. The gap between life and art has narrowed. Raza lives to paint and paints to live. He is no longer worried about his identity as a painter. He is in Paris and yet in India. He would heartily endorse the view of Gertrude Stein: "But what good are roots if you can't take them with you?" Raza has carried his roots with him and they continue to nourish him both aesthetically and spiritually. In his work, as in his life, he is at home.

Due to space constraints, we are unable to carry our regular columns like **Objects, Health, People** and **Life** this week

**“I have an inner music”**

## At home with Raza

As he celebrates his 80th birthday this month, poet **Ashok Vajpeyi** draws Paris-based painter Sayed Haider Raza into an extended conversation on his rich life and work. In an extract from his forthcoming book, Vajpeyi reveals why the artist remains so distinctly Indian

### On his stay in France:

It has helped me not only to see what was best in the painting of Nicolas de Stael, Mondrian or, shall I say, Soulage, to name just a few, it has given me the possibilities to come to develop my own technical potential, command over the language, painted language, that I am using. I don't forget my childhood and youth and I don't forget the lessons I received here: to start with the elementary problems of colours, lines, space, form. France is a country where sense of proportion is

extraordinary in buildings, in art, in literature, in life. It is also important in art and painting. Now if I didn't have this aggregation, I would not have painted *Tam Shunya* or *Bindunaad*, the radiating black. I realised the importance of black. I link it with Indian thought. I think that black is the mother colour, the mother of all colours.

On how his major inspiration comes from the world of literature, poetry and ideas, philosophical, spiritual and religious:

I do believe that the greatest stimulation that has come to me is from poetry. There are extraordinary things which have been said in Indian poetry, in Hindi or Urdu poetry, in French poetry, things which are really coming from the depths of the heart with conviction which can be conveyed only in words. These things are very difficult for a painter to say because the medium used are words, not paint. The painters have also said very beautiful things time and again. But my inspiration has been the ideas of writers or painters and even musicians such as the Ustad, who said: "See with your ears, hear with your eyes."

On why he doesn't play music while painting anymore:

I think I have an inner music which is more important than the finest music I could hear on a record. And this inner music is very precious to me, it is my music, it is my tune and I feel it can be heard only in silence. I don't want noise, I don't want

interruptions. I am with my beloved, I am with my idea. I feel that a total concentration is indispensable when I am working. Wherein past, present, future unite where the genetic memory, the racial unconscious, your training and your learning, your life of everyday all come together in a very strange and indescribable manner and you are able to say the essence of

Thank goodness.

I had been seeing things kind of blurry and getting headaches for a while now. But I kept putting it off.

Wonder what I was scared of? An eye check-up?

All it took was a bit of time. Now I don't have to live with blurred vision and strained eyes.

And the confidence... wow!

**“After putting it off and putting it off,**



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