



Master strokes

S H Raza, founder member of the Progressive Artists' Group, talks about art, love, Paris, India and the future

Damini Purkayastha

The warm winter sunlight streams in through parted curtains and falls softly on the man who sits in the centre of the room. The 86-year-old is deep in conversation with a woman; they talk in Sanskrit, Hindi, English and French while others in attendance struggle to follow. She looks at the work he has done in the past few days and says it reminds her of *Vairochana*, the Sun God. He pulls out a sheet of paper and writes it down, asking her politely if he may name this work *Vairochana*.

Meet Sayed Haidar Raza, one of the best-selling artists of the new millennium and a man who has seen and nurtured Indian art into its own. On his annual visit to India from Paris, Raza is very busy not meeting socialites. "I am here to learn more about Indian culture, not to socialise," he says.

Having grown up in the Sagar District, Raza says he was always surrounded by nature. As he began to formally study art in the 40s, he was struck by the mindless way Indian students were asked to follow European masters. "Tagore, Shergil and Jamini Roy were exceptions, the rest were pseudo-Indian artists. No one was encouraged to follow the inner eye, the *antar jyoti* that is integral to Indian art," he explains.

Disillusionment infused a sentiment of

rebellion and Raza, along with Husain, Souza and others began the Progressive Artists' Group soon after Independence. "Our art was very different but we all shared the same sentiment of wanting something dynamic, something original in Indian art."

The lack of libraries, museums and galleries made him decide to leave for France. "I am very stubborn—once I decided to go France, that was it. I learnt French for two years and was awarded a two-year scholarship by the French government," he says. When he reached France in October 1950, he was in love. "I still remember looking around the city standing in front of a statue of Balzac. I went to the Louvre, I saw the masters' works in the original, it was unbelievable."

And yet, it wasn't art that made him stay on in France, but love. In 1959 he met and married a young French artist named Janine. "Her mother requested me not take her daughter away from her, and so I stayed on. After all, once your heart is taken, you are taken," the artist says. "The reason I am telling you this is because I want people to understand that I didn't leave my country... I fell in love."

Unfortunately, Raza's wife passed away in 2002, just a few years before the artist was given his due. "The fame and money came in 2004, before that it was a struggle. I painted for 30 years to know what art is and then another 20 to bring in an Indian aesthetic into my work."

Raza, who has visited the art school of Baroda, J J School of Arts, Shantiniketan



JASJEET PLAHA

I hope to start a cultural centre in Delhi where students have access to original Indian art, ancient and modern sculptures, wood carvings and a well-stocked library.

S H RAZA

and several schools in Delhi, feels things are improving in terms of art education. "They are evolving. Sometimes institutions are confused but they are more in line with Indian thought today."

Raza has decided to make his contribution to students in the form of a cultural centre in the city. "It is a plan I have been discussing with Ashok Bajpayee, Satish Modi and a few others," he says, explaining that the centre would have 12th century Indian sculpture, contemporary art, galleries for rotating exhibitions, a centre for music and dance, fully furnished libraries and ancient sculptures and wood carvings for students to come and understand their rich heritage."



RAZA'S STUDIO IN PARIS. PICTURE COURTESY ART ALIVE GALLERY