

There is no proper art criticism in Pakistan; what we find are simply occasional bursts of promotional writing

Art and the Pakistani press

by A.R. Nagori

'I am anxious that the world should be inclined to look to painters for information on painting' — J. Constable.

The hallmark of the Greek civilization was free discussion on any subject under the sun. There being no newspapers and periodicals their free discussion and debates on any discipline of knowledge took place not only in academies or town-halls, but even on street corners in Athens, groups were seen busy engrossed in discussions. There was no restriction of any nature on free expression of thought. Views were not only heard and exchanged but were often challenged or contradicted with counter arguments even if they happened to come straight from the greatest teacher-philosopher of the time. No censor or code of ethics restricted interaction of ideas, and hence the era is remembered as the age of wisdom and enlightenment.

Audience

Subsequently, in the ages to follow, with the revolutionary invention of paper and press, enlightened countries of the world enlarged the scope of free exchange of knowledge and sharing of ideas for greater human happiness all over the world.

Artists took advantage of the press and printing industry. A number of artists came forward to express their views regarding their art. Many published their diaries, journals, books and biographies. True, the main business of the artist lies in the making of his art. Nevertheless, he has written and talked a great deal about it — about painting, sculpture, and painters and sculptors as they are and should be. A good deal of these writ-

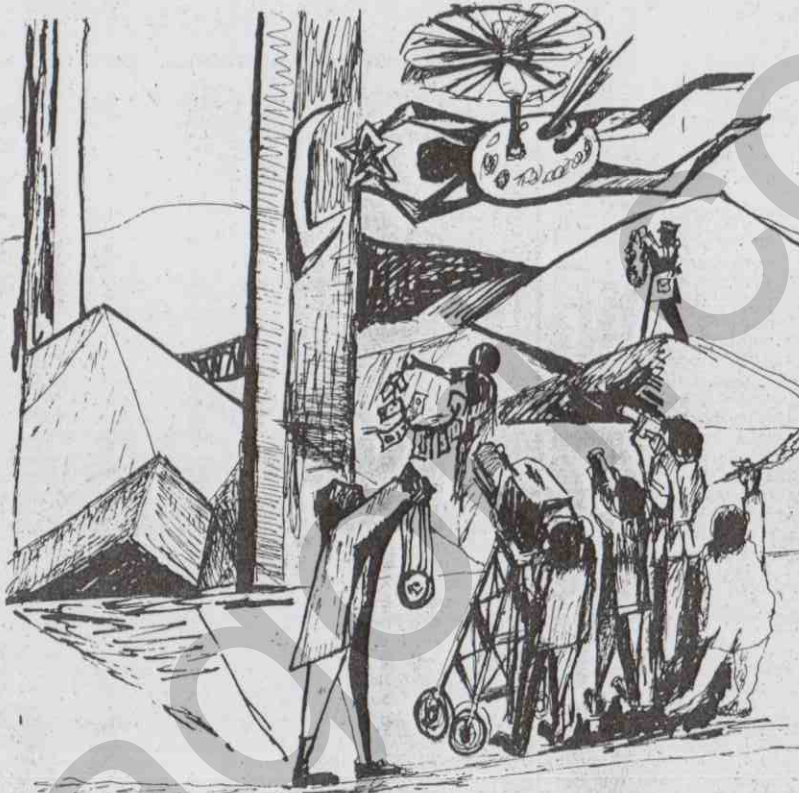
ings and discussions have in spite of everything been public, addressed to a variety of audiences: to an artist's prospective buyers and patrons; to society in general, and sometimes to posterity; in explanation, in defence of how the artist works and behaves, or what he, as one amongst many beings, does. As his audience varied so also has the artist changed the subject and tone of his writing. He has discussed with his patrons and dealers, spoken of technique and aesthetics with his fellow artists and his pupils, and tried to explain the moral, material and psychological difficulties of creation. He has praised his own work to critics, sent letters to the editors in answer to journalists' attack or professional intrigues, and tried to keep and further; works that he approved.

He has issued manifestos such as Mexicans' revolutionary 'Public Art,' explained intellectual aesthetic movements such as the German expressionists, 'Die Brooke,' 'Blue Retier,' New-objectivity, Italian futurism, Russian Suprematism, Spanish Surrealism, Dadaism etc. These were written statements of artists after carrying out the principle they embodied.

Writings

Artists' writings bring to mind Leonardo's Notebooks, Vasari's 'Lives of Painters,' Michaelangelo's sonnets and 'conversations,' Reynolds 'Discourses,' Delacroix's Journal, Van Gogh's and Pissarro's Letters. The tremendous work of Delacroix, forming his letters and art criticism, perhaps the most complete revelation of an artist's mind, is a heroic instance. Other artists in France and elsewhere, of the same period, recorded their thoughts in this characteristic way.

David's fusion of art and politics and his use of art as a political instrument is not only unique by itself but also because it is found in pre-



twentieth century painting. (This writer believes that the present socio-political conditions of our country resemble David's environment of anarchy which was followed by a dictatorial regime in France). Blake wrote to defend and explain his work to the public. Courbet and Whistler knew how to do the same and turn the disadvantages of hostility into the eventual advantage of notoriety. Matisse, Picasso, Leger, Kandinsky and Klee, left monumental intellectual writing on art and aesthetics.

Farsighted and progressive publishers, editors and media men in enlightened countries encouraged artists to write and speak about art. In our country too, a great deal of free discussion on art took

place in the pages of 'DAWN,' 'Pakistan Times,' and 'Civil & Military Gazette,' of the early 50s. One recalls the intellectual tussle and scholarly debate between Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Pakistan Times) and painter-writer Khalid Iqbal (writing under a pen-name, in 'Civil & Military Gazette').

The press in Pakistan enjoyed enough sunshine during the pre-Islamic Republic' days. It reflected the true public expression and aspirations of the time. An example of art enthusiasm was witnessed in controversies such as the one Attiya Begum's (wife of painter Faizee Rehman) letter to the editor had started (C & MG, 4 June 1949). She condemned Zubajda Agha's work which was exhibited in Karachi—Hassam Habib, Arshad Hussain and many

others posted conflicting rejoinders with the same zeal. The debate was highly educative and informative for young art students who read and enjoyed newspapers and found them more interesting than their text books on art appreciation.

Debate

Another incident of controversy, involving the writer of this article, was initiated by an 'Art Critic' of Karachi's Morning News. The debate that followed was somewhat in bad taste and turned ugly at times, nevertheless it provided and generated public interest in art and art writing. This writer's paper 'Art Criticism in Pakistan,' read at a Karachi seminar, was vehemently commented upon by a

journalist belonging to a daily. But to the credit and wisdom of its editor then, they published 'Artist's protest' on the daily's misreporting and malicious campaign. The artist had commented, "...It is a great misfortune of various arts in general and journalism in particular that there is not a single qualified art critic of calibre that I know of in Pakistan who could help the public and artists alike by giving his honest and constructive criticism..." To that opinion the Art-Critics rejoinder was, "...Nagori wants art critics to specialise in their task. Maybe he wants Kenneth Clark and Eric Newton to review his indifferent works, and that is like a mouse wanting to play with a lion..." (Morning News, Nov: 29, 1974). The write-ups appeared in instalments on the subject condemning artists en-bloc. Regardless of the crude and arrogant expressions used, such controversies and the editor's laxity helps to increase knowledge, promotes art and retains the interest of the reader. Unfortunately that useful trend is no more to be seen for several reasons and art writing is confined to occasional bursts of promotional write-ups.

Writers or journalists are not solely to be blamed for the absence of interesting art criticism. For one, we have artists whose numbers could be counted on fingertips and they too are neither prolific art creators nor are they able to express their point of view of their art (if there is any) to enquiring art critics or journalists. Those who could express themselves well on art, have opened art galleries in Pindi, Lahore and Karachi, or else some of them are engaged in gaining more profitable and lucrative assignments from Islamabad. Their expressive talent is consumed in PR, they are too cautious for they live within glass-houses; nobody wants to lag behind in the rat-race.

PTV

On a suggestion from this

writer, an artist/gallery owner lamented that once he tried a get-together of exhibiting artists with journalists and critics and reached a conclusion that it was not worth it.

Two most senior and highly decorated painters of Pakistan appeared in PTV programme 'Chehray'. One of them, asked to describe his art, claimed 'no artist in the world, in the last 100 years could produce a drawing equal to what he draws.' Luckily for him, the compeere and audience comprised equally dim wits who clapped at this statement. Another celebrity, a personal friend of mine and a loveable personality, declared that, 'He paints king of kings' portraits because that creates a bigger impact.' The same avant-garde 'patriot' was asked, where would he like to be born again if he was given another life. Pat came his reply; 'Pakistan.' Obviously, where else on earth is there such a heaven (where knives and nuts are crowned kings, in all walks of life). This is what we have to represent art at highest level. Talk to any 'Tamgha' holder and apart from a couple of exceptions, no one would be able to speak on his own art. They say, they have travelled (in most cases, on government expense) from Bikini to Timbaktu seen Paris, have had several shows in several countries and had reviews written in the 'San Paulo Supplement,' 'El-Cortez Review,' stayed years at San Diego, etc, etc. They are all a disappointing lot.

I was wrong in my suggestion, that critics should be exclusively qualified for art; instead, editors should ask crime reporters to dash off from reporting a murder scene to an art exhibition to get a para or two for the next art review (perhaps and rightly so, editors believe that there is hardly any difference between the two 'events'). If there was an exclusive art critic, he would starve to death, for obvious reasons.

Constable's desire remains unfulfilled in our case.