

Can art be called Islamic?

Labelling all works of art done in Muslim countries as Islamic is incorrect. Can one call Mughal paintings created by Hindu painters as Islamic? The present retrogression of art in Pakistan points the same way.....

by A.R. Nagori

It was a rare opportunity, courtesy Indian TV. The conducive winds and the failure of KTV engineers to the telecast made it possible for us to watch an excellent programme on the Indian painter S.H. Raza. Presentation apart, the programme proved thoughtprovoking and quite absorbing especially pretty Dr. Geeti Sen's presence and her apt questions, coupled with the artist's answers was worth watching.

Religious

Other similar programmes, luckily have been reaching us in Karachi. Comprising a couple of Indian painters, interviewed by the knowledgeable, spontaneous, and evercharming Uma Vasudeva. With the exception of a stray programme on Indian culture 'India Alive' where a sculptor spoke on his work, all the others have been really good. Such programmes are quite informative for an ignorant person like me who is completely in the dark as regards the contemporary Indian art scene.

Coming back to the recent work of Raza shown on ITV it depicted a marked departure from his earlier works which were influenced by the secular elements such as Rajas, Rajinis, Gujrati paintings and the early Rajistanis. Specially in the division of space such as always placing one flat coloured strap at the top or bottom of a painting. His present mood reveals his fascination for the Hindu philosophy, particularly the 'Tantric' Cult. He painted the Tantric 'Bindu' with a large centrally placed 'Black Circle' on several canvases. At times he sees two lines, horizontal and vertical bisecting each other in the centre creating a

'Bindu', the point. This is how he visualizes and communicates the tantric motif as an aesthetic experience.

Raza's work was already well entrenched in the tradition of Indian art and had its roots and continuity in the mainstream. The Saraswati has reached the Parisian Saagar, and so has his latest work. 'Bindu' tree

was airlifted from its natural jungle environs to Paris and its well planned symmetrical gardens. But the jungle has its own natural beauty and so have the gardens. Raza's work brings out the best of both. An Indo-Parisian fragrance.

Another leading Indian artist M.F. Hussain has already successfully worked at art loaded with Hindu Mythology and Philosophy. It is interesting to note that both the leading artists of India are Muslims, and probably belong to Syed families, a caste considered more pious and privileged, because they claimed direct lineage from the prophet.

Parisian

Hussain picked up the threads from Amrita Sher Gill and advanced the modern Indian painting with a more native flavour and texture, (absent in Amrita). Motives and symbols that retain the Indian sensual appeal. Raza's on the other hand seem more intellectual, and mathematical, and are rendered in sophisticated Parisian avant garde style. A la Raja Rao on canvas, minus the 'Serpent and the Rope'.

This is the stray observation one picks up without actually studying them or having the opportunity to see their work in original. It could be a wrong observation altogether, for it is based on viewing some tattered pages of periodicals reaching us courtesy the provision stores which use them



as waste paper for wrapping.

Artist Raza is presently on a tour of India, at the special invitation of the Indian govt on the occasion of the Triennial International at Delhi. He has been living in Paris for the last thirty five years. His return was marked by an emotional experience at his birth place Kakaya, and his old school. When asked of his feelings, he reminded Geeti that sentiments and sentimentality are two different things. This is what has inspired me to say a thing or two to my countrymen on this very subject!

As a painter, I am convinced that consciously or unconsciously, one's geographical, socio-political and religious environment plays a vital role in imparting character and style to one's work of art. No matter what you do, if one is sincere, one simply can't do away with his or her roots. The smell of the soil the air one breathes have their role to play. Despite the sanctions and the hurdles by the obscurantists, the contributions of the Muslims in Fine Arts is enormous and indisputable.

But to give vent to sentimentality by using the prefix 'Islamic' is misleading. While the manifestation of sentiment is positive and a plus point in art or life but the manifestation of sentimentality is negative.

Secular

Art in Muslim countries bears a distinct character according to the political conditions which have a bearing on

the sensitivity of people living in a particular area. It is incorrect to label all works done in Muslim countries under 'Islamic Art'. Can one call Mughal Paintings to be 'Islamic Art' since the Mughal school comprised many Hindu artists and their subject matter was secular? Unlike Christian, Buddhist and Hindu Art, Muslims have one point to their credit — their art has been the most secular! While others used art for the expression and propagation of their religion, Art in Islam didn't keep this in view. There is no priest, monk or a pandit to give the artist a guideline for the practice of his art or make art subservient to state ideology. (Only recently, were artists at Islamabad handed over a prescription to prepare the art work according to 'ideology').

But to bracket art with religion is misleading for one thinks that Islamic art was also something like the Christian, Buddhist or Hindu Art.

Bleak

Had there been intolerant Popes and Medicis in Rome Italian masterpieces would have remained sentimental and could not have given birth to that Renaissance trio — Michaelangelo, Leonardo and Raphael.

Here is an interesting piece of conversation between Michaelangelo. It was not easy to involve Michaelangelo into conversation but his friend princess Vittoria Colonna sometimes succeeded.