

# The artist's place in society

**So long as there are political wrongs to be righted and unjust conditions requiring change, art must participate in the development of popular attitudes which can lead to a better society**

by A.R. Nagori

Committed artists speak about "artistic responsibility". They believe that art does not exist merely to entertain and gratify the senses. It must play a role in the improvement of our collective existence.

Such views of 'artistic responsibility' are opposed by those who feel that they serve society best when they discover new forms or techniques; when they create new beauty and emphasise the honesty of their personal feelings, and give their perception of 'reality'. They are not entirely wrong as my illustration of three contemporary painters shows them painting a 'reality' in front of them, according to their individual vision and perception. All three canvases carry different relative values. None can be denounced as non-art; but value judgements and audiences differ accordingly.

## Avant Garde

The prime objective of the portrait painter is to please the sitter — i.e. the patron; his work has value for that particular individual and relative group. The artist gets monetary reward and publicity. The other painter I have shown is one whose primary concern seems personal feeling for design, composition, technique and form. A dictator's nose touching a flower has aroused his aesthetic sense. He considers himself to be a creator of 'avant-garde' art. Perhaps he is not dishonest either in labelling himself so. In Pakistan the label of 'avant-garde' is easily pasted on people with foreign bio-datas: not only this but the country's highest awards are bestowed on the basis of the largest number of 'visits abroad', in whatever capacity; through what manipulation facilitated such innumerable scholarships or exchange visits under cultural pacts, no one down the Margalla hills, has ever been able to find out. The avant-gardist approach has returns too; for buyers book

such works in advance.

The third category of artist shows emotional involvement with a deep sense of social commitment, by being on the side of the oppressed majority. In my illustration he is nearer to the oppressed person, painting on the floor, recording his impression of the inhuman drama of contemporary history. It is here that John Ruskin's observations are pertinent, when he says that men leave behind a created civilization and their history in their manuscripts of deeds, monuments and writings. But that none of their historical manuscripts are reliable and authentic until and unless the book of their arts, which is the most trustworthy record of their history, is not consulted. Do the monumental complexes built at Islamabad reflect our masses aspiration? Could our present textbooks on history prepared under Orwellian 'dis-information' cells be taken as any future historian's references? The tragedy is that our artists are being lured by lucrative contracts such as the interior decoration of an Assembly Building. The picture painted by this artist (see illustration) is not rewarding in any material sense and not worthy of being hung on any drawingroom wall but it certainly has social, educational and historical value for society and for posterity. The artists of this category believe that they are also citizens and must take an interest in the welfare of the society as do other citizens in the social and

political events of their time.

## David

Despite being stereotyped and romantic, and despite their irresponsibility or inability to function adequately in practical affairs, artists are as politically and socially mature a group, as physicians or lawyers. But just as some lawyers devote their time on clients with tax and property problems, others seek legislative roles. So also do some artists create paintings of flowers and noses for 'avant-garde', affluent drawing rooms while others paint the people's aspirations, and disappointments in life.

The French painter Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863) painted one of the early monuments of revolutionary art 'Liberty leading the People'. But before him the greatest political and activist painter Jacques Louis David (1748-1825) used art as a political instrument, something regarded as unique in pre-20th century art history.

David was a painter cum political figure of the revolutionary Napoleonic era. His work is unique in the history of art not only for reflecting the spirit of his age, but for actually shaping that spirit, through his own efforts and activities. His was inclined towards neoclassicism which was nurtured along with the Jacobin doctrine (i.e. direct democracy, a republic exalting the principle of sovereignty of the people, the liberty, equality



and fraternity of all men and women). He was an active member of Jacobin club, 'Society of Friends of the Constitution'. He is an artist of distinct phases and changing styles — painting from Rococo, Baroque to Realist and Classical styles, a great variety from canvas to canvas. But he is at his best, in his work of the revolutionary period done in the realistic style. As a youth David was on a painting assignment in Rome (1770) where he came into contact with the radical political doctrine of that time. His conversion culminated (later in France) in the painting 'Oath of the Horatio', inspired by a ballet based on Corneille's 'Horace' which spelt the downfall of the Ancient Regime. The painting created a sensation and became the rallying cry for the Jacobins. In the Convention (of radicals)

he helped to inspire the revolutionaries. He demolished the National Academy of Art which pursued the Monarch's policies. His painting 'Death of Marat' is an 18th century 'Pieta', the religious piece of anti-clerical forces. (Marat was a skillful and learned physician and a radical politician. As a demagogic editor of a newspaper 'Ami du Peuple' he contended that reform must benefit all people and could only be secured by direct popular action. He was betrayed and murdered in a friend's house). This painting was amongst David's most powerful works. Napoleon was great admirer of David and uttered these words, "only David understood me". David accepted the offer to become a 'Court Painter' but declined to accompany the emperor as consul to Egypt. He was imprisoned in 1794 re-

leased in 1795 and sent to Brussels in exile which was an essentially sterile existence.

This writer believes that Mexican Revolutionary art of 20th century owes much to this great master.

## Sacrifice

Most third world countries, under authoritarian regimes, today face similar conditions to those of 18th century France.

If art is a reflection of the environment, one simply is not reconciled to how Parisian 'avant garde' art of the 20th century can be planted here in our country with its medieval age conditions. Perhaps that is why we have national monuments modeled after the Eiffel Tower, but, which end, up looking like eye-sores.

The struggles and sacrifices of people comprising writers, artists, all professionals, com-

mon men and women jointly resulted and culminated in the French Revolution; on such strong roots stands the edifice of modern European democracies, socialist states and politburos. Will we ever achieve a people's rule? If this realisation is achieved by our artists, writers and intellectuals, there is hope that the children of our children shall enjoy the sunshine and glory of human happiness in liberty, for then our tortuous times would not have passed in vain.

N.B. Schopenhauer was not discovered for 40 years for Hegel suited fascist regime best. All state propaganda machinery trumpeted and glorified Hegel as the prophetic philosopher of the German 'Fatherland'. No one dared speak against 'State ideology' which had Hegelian support for authoritarianism and perpetual rule of the Fascist junta. (Plato excluded slaves from participating in Republic's affairs, Aristotle improved upon and said all citizens are equal and eligible for state activity. But then he also advocated that citizenship should not be granted to slaves and manual workers. Thanks to his anti-democracy and anti-people 'remedial' suggestions, one finds evidence of people's resistance and some democratic movement's existence in their time). Hegel followed Aristotle in advocating the rule of a 'super-race' and 'supermen'. In Orwellian expression 'all are equal but some are more equal'. Similar sort of intellectual bungling is found in the arts today in Pakistan. Promotions of fakes are made at the cost of genuine works, the high priests of art indulge in slogan mongering. All this reminded me of Schopenhauer's expression, 'For if we are silent, who will speak?' and compelled me to write on art although writing is not my poison.