

The paintings on the wall

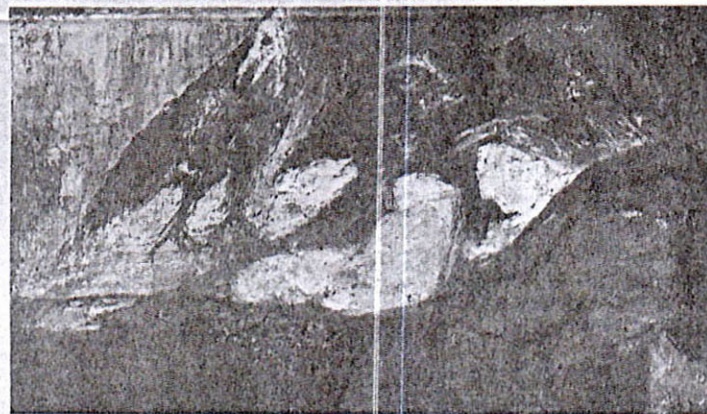
Amber Romasa writes about Nagori's philosophy, his struggle, vision and sensitivity

THE dance of Lord Shiva is said to be both of destruction and creation. Holding a flame in his hand, he whirls over and crushes the body of a demon, Apasmara Purusha, symbolic of man's inertia and ignorance. Many genuine artists are caught in a similar dance of death and creation, doomed to wreak havoc on putrid thoughts and annihilate orthodox complacency while they create a world of imagination, aspiration, idealism and beauty. In their hands is the blazing fire of creativity and individuality, fire which gives hope to humanity, flames that light up the world.

History is full of these iconoclasts. Giotto, Grunewald, Bosch, Breughel the elder, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Tintoretto, Chardin, Courbet, Goya, Daumier, Picasso, Rivera, Orozco, Beckmann and numerous other masters. Literature, painting and music, all produced revolutionary individuals, and their life makes fascinating reading. They are the voice of people in search of their identity, and yet, paradoxically, are the guide for a civilisation. Through their works they have dared to snatch the fire from the gods for the mortals. To steal this blaze from the gods is no easy task and destruction of orthodoxy exacts a price—the punishment of Prometheus for stealing fire from the gods, which he had gifted to people to improve humanity's future.

While it might be interesting to read about the artist's life and views, a critical question remains whether it is necessary to know more about the artist to better appreciate a work of art, or must the creator be separated from its creation? Should one enjoy a sculpture without knowing about the hand that wrought it, or read a work of literature without thinking about the writer who brought the characters to life? Should David be separated from Michelangelo and severed from Rodin? Proponents of pure aesthetics would argue that a work must be shorn of all previous associations and linkages; unfettered they wish to savour the beauty of a work.

For many others, knowing more of the evolution of the artist or the writer, their vision, philosophy and struggle, adds a richer sense of enjoyment of the work. Their individualism, lust for life and lone battles, inspire and instruct. Who can read Yevgeny Zamyatin but ignore his approach towards the Soviet establishment, or dismiss Gustave Courbet writing to Napoleon III while declining the 'Legion of Honour'. "... Permit me then, Your Excellency, to decline the honour you have thought to give me. I am 50



Clockwise from top left: Secretary Bird; Junkies 2; and Cultures over Green (oil on board)

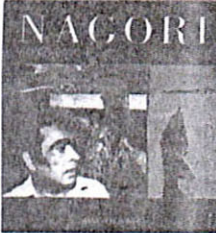
It would be a pity to lose out the words of the artist, especially on the flowering art period of the '60s in Pakistan, particularly of Lahore and the ideas discussed in its coffee houses, which were comparable to the cafes and artist-rooms restaurants at Montmartre a la Moulin Rouge by Pierre La Mure...

Art is communication, often it breaks down the walls between humans, and Nagori often talks fervently about the positive role that art can play in uplifting the masses and creating awareness of social ills. Nagori fondly quotes Picasso's words: "What do you suppose an artist is? If a painter, an imbecile who has nothing but eyes, nothing but ears if he is a musician, a lyre at every level if he is a poet, nothing but muscles if he is a boxer? Quite the contrary, he is a political being, constantly aware of what is going on in the world, whether it be harrowing, bitter, or sweet, and he cannot help being shaped by it. How would it be possible not to take interest in other people, to withdraw into some ivory tower so as not to share existence with them? No, painting is not interior decoration. It is an instrument of war for offence and

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The book is a biography of renowned artist **Abdur Rehman Nagori**



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years old, and have always lived free; let me finish free. When I am dead they will have to say of me: he never belonged to any school, to any church, to any institution, to any academy, above all not to any regime, unless it were the regime of liberty..." Who can discard the powerful words of Ernst Neizvestny telling Khrushchev, when asked about art under Stalin, "I think it was rotten and the same kind of artists are deceiving you", or Neizvestny's response to the Premier on how long Neizvestny could sustain state pressure: that there are certain bacteria, very small, which live in saline solution and can dissolve the hoof of a rhinoceros. Truly, the artists have at all times been the instruments and spokespersons for the spirit of the age, and Ezra Pound has aptly called them "the antennae of the race".

A case can be made that

understanding the creator enhances the appreciation and understanding of the work. "I am anxious that the world should be inclined to painters for information on painting", says John Constable. Conversations with artists often provide unique insights into their work. Their words provoke, vex, amuse or enlighten. Many artists have issued manifestos and published diaries. Mexican painters have explained the revolutionary Public Art and its intellectual and aesthetic canons. German Expressionists, Die Bruke, Blaue Reiter, New Objectivity, Italian Futurism/Dadaism, Spanish Surrealism, Russian Suprematism, carry written statements of the artists explaining principles they embodied. Leonardo da Vinci's *Notebooks*, Vasari's *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, Michelangelo's *Conversations*, Reynolds' *Dis-*

courses, Delacroix's *Journal*, Van Gogh and Pissarro's letters throw light on their paintings. 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. Matisse, Picasso, Leger, Kandinsky and Klee left monumental intellectual writing on art and aesthetics. Ben Shahn wrote the book *The Biography of a Painter* to explain his painting 'Allegory' to critics who had wrongly associated communist sources.

It is a myth that artists are unable to explain their work; instead, many are excellent conversationalists, and when their words are not recorded, posterity loses many irreplaceable insights into the creative process. One would hope that someone would take up a systematic study of the artists in Pakistan and record in one book conversations with them.

The paintings on the wall

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defence against the enemy.”

The link between art and politics is an organic part of the conscience of a modern person and particularly of the conscience of every creative genius. Pablo Neruda famously asserted that those who wanted to separate his political poetry from the rest were enemies of poetry, for separating ethics from aesthetics meant distancing the man from his work. The inseparability of art and politics stems from the nature of art itself. However, instead of people's tradition found in our Sufis — Rehman Baba, Bulleh Shah, Baba Farid, Shah Abdul Latif, and such other native torch-bearers, political expediency selects works where motivated tradition is dished out that serves political objectives. It has been said that anyone who makes people believe that they are thinking will be loved by them, while anyone who actually makes them think will be hated. Schopenhauer was not discovered for 40 years for Hegel suited the fas-

cist regime best. All state propaganda machines trumpeted and glorified Hegel as the prophet philosopher of the fatherland. No one dared speak against state ideology which had Hegelian support for authoritarianism and perpetual rule of the fascist junta. Antiquity too had its “doctrine of necessity”. Plato excluded slaves from participation in the republic's affairs. Aristotle improved upon it and said all citizens are equal and eligible for state activity, but then he said citizenship should not be granted to slaves and manual workers. Art also often received patronage when it best fitted the state's dictates ...

Nagori says that his art is not based on propaganda, nor can it bring direct relief to the plight of the masses it portrays, but it does raise awareness among those who have the means to bring about a much-needed and long-awaited social change. He says, “I don't think I am a champion of people's causes as one could expect from a reformer or politician. My identification with the

masses is simple. I was driven a great deal nearer to pessimism and grim doctrines by the nature of reality shown to me by Schopenhauer: ‘the sum total of our own lives is that we struggle, suffer and die’. This led Nietzsche to say ‘God is dead.’ I am not an admirer of Nietzsche as Iqbal, was for his doctrine of the superman, but I believe in his ‘art-idolatry.’”

In painting or in his writings on art, Nagori's expression remains forceful and blunt. Any conversation with him on the subject of his work and life means being exposed to an encyclopaedic range of knowledge on the world of art, the significance of protest art, the Indian and Muslim heritage of art, combined with a brimming passionate alertness to historical and present injustices.

“We are a nuclear power, but a greater fact and a greater tragedy is that starvation and famine have taken a heavy toll in Thar, and dearth of water has ruined the wealth of flora and fauna, endangering ecological order; besides there are guns, drugs and exploitation of women and children and apathy towards education and health. Can any breathing soul remain unaffected, especially the most sensitive of all segments of a society called perceptive artists?”

These social issues find resonance in his work. For example, in one painting there will be reference to the Greek myth on the abduction of Europa and the allegory will allude to the present mistreatment of women in our country; another alphabet painting will reflect Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the exploitation by “pigs” of the many helpless animals of the land, yet another will have Hanuman rescuing the Babri Mosque while humans are busy in its destruction, or the animals from Panchatantra and Saadi's Gulistan, passing commentary on sycophancy and the exploitative political scenario. He has protested against the Hudood Ordinance and injustice to women. A raped blind girl sentenced by the Shariat Court on charges of adultery was the subject of his painting. He has painted a woman raped by a jailer in the Multan jail, and women paraded naked in Nawabpur and Mardan, the accursed ritual practice of a feudal society. Victor Anant commented on the painting depicting women without lips, “All Nagori's women are ineloquent. They can't speak themselves for they arise in him as forms, which he, logically, can set free by speaking for them.” Nagori's latest painting series titled “May-day, May-

day” denounced the ghastly attacks on places of prayer, in May 2004, at Karachi and elsewhere in the country.

The artist satirises and mocks the forces of exploitation and enjoins the viewer to also feel the injustice inflicted on the downtrodden and the meek, giving voice to the voiceless. Ali Imam said that many find in Nagori's pictures an expression of anger they themselves feel against the degradation of our time, and his work has “earned him a place in the record of social protest and resistance of both intellectual and ordinary people who refuse to let contemporary events drain them of human sensitivity.”

Today, Nagori, due to ill health, is no longer as prolific as he used to be, and his last exhibition “Return to Sphinx,” held in 2004, was claimed by him as his “swan song”. He wishes not to display his latest works any more. Yet, one hopes that his life's philosophy, struggles and vision would provide an impetus to other students of art to continue to steal the fire of Prometheus, to stamp Apasmara under their feet, to light up the world through aesthetic pleasure, and right political wrongs through the fire of creativity. ■