



Art

A Parsi in Paris

Only a painter of Jehangir Sabavala's sensitivity could help a writer stay true to her craft, with infinite grace and honest generosity

BY MEHER MARFATIA



Most eight-
een
monsoons
ago, I had a memorable brush with the quiet greatness of this doyen of the Indian art world. It proved a memorable interview, tagged to which came a literary lesson of lasting value.

To mark the opening of Jean-Loup Sieff's exhibition of photographs titled "Paris of the Artists", displayed at the Alliance Francaise, I offered The Sunday Times a story on contemporary Indian painters privileged to have studied or worked in the world's most romantic, creatively charged cities. It was an experience, I gathered over days of research, which wonderfully touched the lives of Jehangir Sabavala, Akbar Padamsee, Nalini Malani and Atul Dodiya at some point in their careers. SH Raza, Shakti Burman and Sujata Bajaj even made beautiful Paree their permanent base.

Home to the ineffable charm of vibrant sidewalk cafes, architectural daring and artistic abandon, Paris, declared Sabavala, is the ideal city to understand art and life. He elaborated on

flanerie, Baudelaire's lovely term for a sudden unfolding of little details spotted in the course of an aimless stroll: "A flaneur saunters along in the pleasantest manner here, taking in the lights, sights and sounds of a city such as this, where just idly roaming the streets can present an edu-



Nannette, 1948, Courtesy Sakshi Gallery

cation." Studying fine art there between 1947 and 1951, the painter recalled how, two years following the end of the war, he witnessed the immense relief of a city

that had known occupation, come out into her own once more. It was a flowering in the wake of depression, which showed abundantly in art, music and fashion. I recorded these impressions faithfully, his pure aesthete's delight on discovering a succession of historic churches, antique shops and marvellous bookstores, especially along the Left Bank of the Seine...

The Monday morning after the piece was published, I got a call from the master of serene landscapes and haunting Cubist-inspired figures. Complimenting me warmly on the article, his refined voice took on an apologetically lower tone as he questioned my choice of a certain phrase, asking what I thought it meant. Truthfully, I was confused myself. Ten

years into the profession,



Still Life: Leaves -- a Violin, 1950, Courtesy Sakshi Gallery

no rookie reporter, I was yet a relatively raw journalist. With a long way to grow before realising how a lucid flow of prose is the best. But there we were, looking at this hopeless tangle of a

"We Zoroastrians are among India's most cosmopolitan people," Sabavala used to say

line, with racy alliterative flourishes sans any real meaning. "Write only as you think and feel, from the head and heart, my dear. Substance outshines style every time," he said softly. His carefully cadenced words made the criticism so acceptable.

Then, gentlemen to the core that he was, Sabavala sensitively suggested, "Now please give me a principle of art I could keep in mind. Go on, writer to painter, I'd love to hear you

being candid about my work." The wail of my year-old baby close by the telephone put a stop to that conversation. At subsequent meetings, though, he greeted me saying, "Still waiting for your comment, I'd really value it."

His was classic completeness. When the cognoscenti tried to project him as representing ultimate Parsi refinement and class, his response typified deep humanism. "There need be no docketing me as Parsi," he held. "I'm proud to belong to our community but the basic pride has always been in my Indian nationality. We Zoroastrians are among India's most cosmopolitan people. Instead of going with the usual formula equating Parsis with all things western, I prefer stating that I am international in my outlook and I embrace universality."

Merci, Monsieur. RIP.