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MAGIC OF COLOURS,
POETRY OF GESTURES

SEN SHOMBIT



Darkness to light: Landing in Kolkata from Shohidnogor 50kms away was like entering a foreign country. I'd leave my mud-bamboo home in a squatted refugee camp without electricity, potable water or sanitation, and see trams, double-decker buses, big buildings in my daily 'touristic' walk from Sealdah station to my college, Government College of Art & Craft.

Sen Shombit is a painter who has stirred my deepest emotions with excitement. His extraordinary humanity arising from his heart is made visible both through his sincere eyes and in his paintings, which naturally continue his 'artistic gestures.' Sen's paintings inflame imagination and touch the heart. Each colour plays a role with precise meaning within his pictorial fabric. Each detail is managed with great care and sensibility. Indian soul, France in his eyes, poetry in his heart: this is Sen.

-Alberto Moioli

Sen was born 1954, he lived poverty stricken in a slum-like refugee camp 50 kms outside Kolkata without electricity, sanitation or potable water. In 1973 at age 19, he daringly catapulted himself without completing his study at Government College of Arts and Crafts in Kolkata to arrive in Paris with only \$8 and some of his art work. He encountered uncertainty, money crunch and big bang culture shock in France. Yet to realise his dream of living in this country of artistic freedom, he has since integrated seamlessly into French society, culturally, socially and in the domain of art. Initially, no immigration papers made penniless

Sen do a sweeper's job in Atelier Gourdon, a lithographic print shop in Cachan outside Paris. Here he met world famous painters Erte, Leonor Fini, Alain Bonnefoit, Jean Carzou, and Yves Brayer among others who mentored him. He hungrily learnt diverse imaginative metaphors and techniques of art application from the renowned artists while serving them as a helper in making their lithographs and watching their paintings. They bought his works to support him. Sen got accepted to study in two prestigious Paris institutions, Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts for 3 years and Académie Julian (Ecole Supérieure d'Arts Graphiques, Penninghen) for 3 years. His education however remained incomplete as he had to immediately pursue a career as a designer for his livelihood.

Recollections: In the artist's words...

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Sen Shombit, *L'escalier de Millet*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2015, 45 x 60 cms

Sen Shombit, *Sacred Soul of Women*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2016, 117 x 107 cms



My refugee camp friends were mighty impressed when I showed it off.

On opening the first glossy art book I recollected my father's words. He'd once said a painter from Holland or Germany, whose name he could not remember, went to France and his colours miraculously changed. A gloomy 'Potato Eaters' was painted in Nuenen, Netherlands, 1885. The same artist painted 'Sunflowers' in France, 1888. His radical colour shift ignited a spark in me. I had to go to France without delay. My colleague's kindness to take me to the American library was priceless. I discovered the painter was Vincent van Gogh.

Dada domination: Regular sketching was mandatory in our college, professors would counsel our work. This was undoubtedly my most valuable training. Senior students (dadas) would give endless advice and severe criticism to intimidate us. We considered the coterie of senior students attached to some professors to be a coveted elite club but we were always excluded from it. While sketching at railway stations, alumni students sometimes sauntered by recounting how studying art was useless because they only got menial jobs like clerks. Such demoralizing talk together with dada domination, coterie exclusion and my poverty stricken family background made me determined to overcome these negatives. Art was my only passion, I had to earn money through art.

No dada, no guru, only Masters: I'm grateful to my art college professors and tough dasas because their intervention resulted in my having a large portfolio of sketches, drawings and water colours. This extraordinarily valuable treasure facilitated my entry in Paris to Ecole des Beaux-Arts and Academie Julian for graphic design. I also sold many of my Kolkata sketches in Paris to earn money.

The incredible difference of art college life in Paris was - no Dada, no

station to my college, Government College of Art & Craft. It was a treat to cross Oberoi Grand when the ferocious looking, elegantly dressed sardarji guard opened the door for hotel guests. A fragrant cold whiff wafted out for a few seconds. I loved this incredible reprieve from hot and dusty Esplanade. It felt like I was crossing an exotic land.

Rich students' forwardness: Small town, low profile students like us were scared to talk to our English-spoken colleagues. But the language of sketching eased communication. A rich colleague who'd give me foreign colours for outdoor sketching one day took me to the American library on SN Banerjee Road. On reaching the imposing building, I backtracked. How could I enter wearing ordinary clothes with rubber sandals and with inability to speak English? Besides I had no money. She assured me the library is free. For me, the American library membership card she made me looked like an international visa!

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Sen Shombit, *Napoleon's Path*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2015, 117 x 107 cms

Guru. Initially I was confused because no professor or senior would impose on a student's liberty of artistic sense. Professors closely examined your work with many references in the art world, but never imposed their own work as reference, nor gave a lecture as feedback. I had to learn in apprenticeship with them, watch how they work, in what context or frame of ideology, then apply my learnt technique and become a self critic. Here I learnt details of classic to breakthrough modern art movements from 1870s, how art has contributed to social life.

Pedagogic teaching systems could vary from place to place, country to country. As a student it was my job to appreciate what is right for me and take that forward. Painting or designing is also a profession like other professions, not platonic love without commerce. For future development, art and artists are needed to inject ideology into society. I realized that painter artists have to have a commercial vision, nurture our artistic life to maturity, produce art and give it meaning.

Searching for an ideology: I've always kept my painting and design life separate. Since 1994, I've been experimenting with numerous paintings to find myself, which I now feel has got a shape. I call it Gesturism Art, gestures that jumble up my canvas with colours. I entered different fine art dimensions, retreated from exhibitions which I've now restarted. Art lovers, art collectors and creative people from different domains and countries come to my atelier, giving my imagination scope to delve deep into my painting ideology.

Design profession: I have conceived design as a strategy through my art to sell products and services for different global companies. CEOs, Managing Directors and owners of companies allowed me to disruptively design sustainable strategies for growth and profitability of their



brands. Design has no meaning unless it connects to the masses and ensures their repeat purchase for unlimited time. This was my great learning. Having envisioned about 2000 brands worldwide, probably in a big part of the world today a large number of people use at least one consumer product that I have designed. To my surprise, Remy Martin's CEO Herve Zeller, considering me an artist than designer, engraved my signature in the classic Armagnac glass bottle I designed. Danone CEO Jacques Vincent, with whom I've worked for 25 years, preferred meetings in my painting atelier, not my design studio, and my business workshops in Cartier Art Foundation, Paris.

Here's the difference between painting and design for me. When I paint I'm boundaryless, I look for an ideology. When I design I have to be creative within the boundary of commercial discipline for the clients'

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Sen Shombit, *Precocious, Acrylic on Canvas*, 2015, 50 x 50 cms



business and earning their profitability.

Lifelong apprenticeship: My Gesturism Art carries a history of apprenticeship. In childhood my mother's lesson was that my poverty should never destroy emotion and neatness. My refugee colony artist Subhinoy (I called him Kaku - uncle) coached me that masterminding a painting needs the disciplined convergence of mind, colour, brush and surface. My Kolkata professor Boidyanathbabu watched over my everyday sketches, which taught me to make strong gestures. Later my Paris professor said I should never lose this style of strong gestures in my work.

Unlike in India, in France there is always an expectation that artists will bring something new and different. In my first 3 years in Paris I was a sweeper in a lithography printshop,

but I was recognised as an artist. When you start life from zero, you can't believe the kind of confidence that builds in you to get such recognition. Helping to clean the press, the floor or the lithography machine colours for famous artists like Erte, Leonard Fini, Jean Carzou, Alain Bonnefoit, Yves Brayer, Lucien Fontanarosa, Vincent Haddelsey, Judith Bledsoe was a great opportunity to learn their different working styles.

In design school, renowned Polish typographer Professor Paul Gabor trained me on typography as a piece of art, its history and skeleton grammar factor. World famous photographer Marc Riboud took me into his Magnum Photos stock archive in Paris. I learnt from him how to watch an instant subject within a frame, that the background, not just the subject, must create interest. Renowned photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson

taught me that visualisation is an instant snap of a real social situation in 24x36mm frame without editing. Mime genius Marcel Marceau taught me that human gesture is a vast ocean that becomes art when an image is frozen.

What's readily available bores me. I constantly search for something incredible. For me, apprenticeship with masters is timeless learning.

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Sen Shombit, *Immoderate Nuraghi*, (Diploma)
Acrylic on Canvas, 2016, 122 x 182 cms

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Sen Shombit, *Armenian Plastic*, Acrylic
Canvas, 2016, 91 x 122 cms

