

Artist and his freedom

I wonder what the western artist must do if he cannot escape the awesome pull and power of the market. He should, I suppose, continue to work within the system while trying to strive against its materialistic values and its cold heart. At least till such time that he is declared 'jealous' of the American way of life and branded *persona non grata*, in current lingo what they call a terrorist.

The materialistic philosophy of capitalism is inherently anti-art. Has anyone heard of an artist dying of hunger and poverty before the barons of industry and commerce replaced the old order, which of course had come to its end and needed to be replaced? Most artists that are celebrated today were in their lifetime spurned by the bourgeoisie.

The bourgeoisie first established its roots in the low countries of Europe. Take, for instance, Holland. The merchants had played a major role in the nationalist fight for independence from Spanish rule. They occasionally commissioned portraits but did not have a tradition of wider artistic concerns. Artists, as a consequence, were forced to adopt new vocations to support themselves as it is with most of our traditional artists and master craftsmen who encourage their young to set up shops or apply for jobs.

Rembrandt is regarded as one of the greatest Dutch painters. Only a few can match his mastery in expressing surface textures or the manner in which he drowns his figures in shadows, to create pensive moods and dramatic contrasts. A shirt sleeve, a creased forehead, a gaunt face, frail hands with network of veins, a sagging old face, speculative eyes focussed on the viewer, are richly painted with skilful brushwork and a deep insight.

Recently a Rembrandt self-portrait, which lay undiscovered for three centuries, because it had been painted over, was sold for 6,949,600 pounds at an auction in London. Rembrandt painted this rather flamboyant portrait of himself when he was 28. Little did he know then that he would die uncelebrated and poor. And what happened to the other great Dutch artist Van Eyck? In the winter that he died of malnutrition and neglect, some of his poor neighbours, helped to collect some coal to keep him from freezing to death. There is little consolation in the fact that he died in a warm bed. It is difficult to imagine that the numerous officials and wealthy burgers he painted in their rich clothes and armour could have forgotten that he ever existed.

I must say that while we in Pakistan may forget our artists and men of letters when they are alive, we never forget to celebrate them in their death. Good riddance, most of them are a pain in their lifetime, anyway.

A third great Dutch painter who comes to mind was Van Gogh.

THE WAY IT WAS



MIAN IJAZ UL HASSAN

The Greeks had great respect for art and philosophy. When they lost faith in philosophy and lofty ideals, their civilisation, which had shone so brightly for centuries, almost instantly dimmed and then died forever

Art.
Daily Times
23.7.07

He lived the last years of his life in Paris. Throughout his career his younger brother Theo supported him. He was never noted for being an artist in his life. Van Gogh lived an abject poor life on dole from his brother and died a destitute.

Some years back, the Dutch established a museum in Amsterdam to honour the great artists. If Van Gogh had been alive, he would not have had the money to visit the museum dedicated to him. Gauguin, the French painter Van Gogh greatly admired but with whom he parted in somewhat tragic circumstances, found himself so lost in his own country that he finally retreated to the Polynesian Island and settled in Tahiti.

Admittedly Cézanne, who is regarded as the father of modern painting, was a misanthrope and a cantankerous person. An old man, he collapsed and died carrying his canvas and easel on his back, coming down a dusty road. These celebrated artists were unable to live by their work. A prospective client was once sizing up Cézanne's painting and wished he could buy one of the apples painted on it. Anxious that the client might change his mind, Cézanne instantly cut out the apple from the canvas and presented it to him. This is the story of each and every painter after the old regime was overthrown and replaced by the bourgeoisie. The image of the starving artist is the creation of the same era. The artist had never starved before.

In ancient past the artist had worked somewhat closely with the state. The great Pericles of Athens who had built the Parthenon for the goddess Athena, after which the city is named, had close and warm friendship with the great sculptor Phydias. Among other works that Phydias carved was the statue of Athena, now lost, and the famous frieze girdling the temple, part of which still survives. Sections of the frieze were appropriated by Lord Elgin and transported to England, where they were kept in the custody of the British Museum. The Elgin marbles as they are called are now being returned to Greece. It is tragic that many of our historical artefacts especially the Gandhara statues and friezes, which were robbed by some of our own well-placed criminals, sold and smuggled out, will never return home.

The Greeks had great respect for art and philosophy and held their painters, carvers, poets, actors and playwrights in high esteem. When they lost faith in philosophy and lofty ideals, their civilisation, which had shone so brightly for centuries, almost instantly dimmed and then died forever.

Prof Ijaz-ul-Hassan is a painter, author and a political activist