Restoring heritage B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN | 2/20/2020

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| BY the mid-18th century, British and European painters did not have to wait in their studios for their subjects. They travelled abroad, often as far away as India, in search of commissions.  One such pioneer was Tilly Kettle who, in the 1770s, made dramatic portraits of Muhammad Ali Khan, Nawab of the Carnatic and then of Nawab Shuja-ud-Daula at Fyzabad. Each centred, bedecked in jewels, like a diamond solitaire in a gilt setting.  Indian rulers were flattered by such attention, but reluctant to spend so much money on painted cloth.  Many such paintings are in public or private collections in the United Kingdom and in India. Pakistan is fortunate to have a series of oil paintings done in the 1840s by Hungarian artist August Schoefft. Born in Budapest in 1809, he succumbed to the lure of the East, reaching Mumbai in 1838. The commissions he executed there for rich Parsis paid for his trip to Kolkata, Varanasi and Delhi, where he sketched the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and his two sons Mirza Jawan Bakht and Mirza Mughal.  The iridescent Sikh court of nearby Punjab proved irresistible. Schoefft spent some months in 1840-41 as the guest of the then Maharaja Sher Singh, the son and successor of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Although Ranjit Singh had died earlier, in 1839, his memory was still alive, as were many of the Sikh, Muslim and Hindu courtiers who populated his open-minded court. Schoefft completed some portraits while at Lahore.  The Russian traveller Prince Alexis Saltykov recalled seeing in Sher Singh`s possession `five or six portraits in oils without f rames, the work of Schoef f t`.  Schoefft returned to Europe where, from the sketches he had done in India, he completed oil paintings. These were exhibited in Vienna in1855. A large number were brought on behalf of the last Maharaja of the Punjab Duleep Singh (by then deposed and living in England). This pictorial cache of history remained with his family until the death in 1957 of his last surviving child, Princess Bamba Sutherland. She died in Lahore.  The collection was rescued from dispersal by a far-sighted secretary of education, Mr Sharif. He arranged for them to be displayedin an air-conditioned gallery in the Lahore Fort.  Alarge panorama of the Sikh durbar of Lahore formed the centrepiece of the exhibition.  Over the years, these paintings have languished through neglect and disinterest.  Unprotected, their paint was chipped by inquisitive viewers, their varnish cracked by inattention. Few Pakistanis were allowed to visit it, and even fewer Sikhs after the wars of 1965 and 1971.  In 1977, the scholar Dr Ahmad Nabi Khan(then superintendent of the Lahore Fort) asked me to write about the collection. The book, he assured me, would be a glossy volume with colour illustrations. I wrote the book in six weeks. It languished for over a year. No one in Pakistan would publish it. Sotheby Park Bernet in London again came to my rescue. Dr M.S. Randhawa, the Sikh polymath who created Chandigarh and founded the Punjab Agricultural University at Ludhiana, generously contributed a foreword.  The published book, like the collection itself, lay forgotten until the year before last, when the Hungarian ambassador Istvan Szabo and his equally enterprising wife Emilia stumbled on the Schoefft paintings during a visit to the Lahore Fort. They had to tip the guard Rs1,000 to gain access to the unlit, unswept gallery. Their love for Hungary and Pakistan fused. Since then, they have battled to have these painting restored, first for an exhibition of Orientalists in Budapest in 2019 (the deadline expired before the government could issue its approval), and now ina to-be-refurbished gallery in the Lahore Fort.  Only someone who has toiled, as they and I have done, over foothills of bureaucracy will know why it is easier to climb Mount Everest. Someone with more power than common sense thought the restora-tion should be done by local `experts` who would touch up the oil paintings with watercolour. Another contended that shifting the large canvas would involve breaking a wall.  No one had told him that the painting had been transported, rolled in a metal tube, from Vienna to the UK in the 1850s and from the UK to L ahore in the 1950s. The federal government, the Punjab government and the Walled City of Lahore Authority squabbled over ownership.  Recently, finally, vital permissions have been accorded. Funds have been contributed by non-government donors. Specialist Hungarian restorers in Budapest are packing their bags and their precious materials to complete their mission of mercy art sans frontières.  This restoration project is more than an act of diplomatic largesse, more than the overdue recognition of a Hungarian artist`s work. It is a reminder to us Pakistanis that, if we continue to neglect our heritage, we stand condemned to forfeit it.  The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |