A reattachment

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN | 2/6/2020

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| AN encounter with Mr Edward Gibbs, Chairman of Sotheby`s Middle East & India, at the Lahore Biennale 02 recently brought back memories, buried, one thought, beyond retrieval.  Usually, I try to avoid references to myself in these columns but I make an exception about this particular meeting. My relationship with Sotheby Parke Bernet started in the 1970s, when its newly established offshoot Philip Wilson Publishers agreed to publish my first book Pahari Paintings and Sikh Portraits in the Lahore Museum.  The research for that book a catalogue of over 500 miniature paintings in the Lahore Museum`s collection began in 1966. Professor Shakir Ali, then principal of the National College of Arts and a board member of the museum, suggested that I a chartered accountant with an un-assuaged passion for art should catalogue the paintings. The previous catalogue had been published in 1922. It was more a handbook of the paintings on display. Following the partition of the Punjab in 1947, the Lahore Museum collection was divided, one-third of it going to the East Punjab Government in India.  I was handed a large trunk containing the residue, which I discovered were significant, if not priceless, examples of miniatures ranging from the 16th to the 19th century. Thanks to the patient generosity of my mother, I used to cycle to the museum each day, and, working gratis, sit in the singlebulb twilight of the curator`s room, examine each painting, noting its size, subject matter, likely provenance and relevant bibliographical details. It was a painstaking, lonely task, made even more trying by the hostility of the inhospitable staff.  By the spring of 1967, I had completed the basic work. All I needed was a publisher. It took 10 years to find one. My mentor throughout this decade of depression was Dr William Archer, the doyen of art historians, who himself laboured with his magnum opus Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills (1973). Sagely, he suggested that I structure my catalogue on the basis of his. I did. He approached Sotheby`s with my manuscript.  They agreed to publishit as a sequel to his bool(, if he contributed a foreword. He did.  And thus, in early 1977, the first copy of my first book was hand-carried by a friendly PIA pilot from London to Karachi, and by another to Lahore.  Only authors who have cradled their first book in their hands will understand that pure effusion of one-sided love a parent feels for a brainchild, one that will never grow up.  My book received a generous reception by everyone except the Lahore Museum. Itdemanded 200 free copies. Had the book not been priced at £25, this request might have been bearable. Such largesse, though, was beyond the means of a struggling author. I had returned to my profession but still lived from hand to pen.  Of the many reviews of my book, the one that remains indelible, appeared in the Financial Times, written by Natwar Singh, then deputy Indian high commissioner in London. Over dinner, Dr Archer pressed Natwar to assess the book on its merits, and not to asser t how marvellous that a Pakist ani Muslim should be writing on Indian miniature paintings. `Absolutely,` Natwar agreed. `The book is clearly a work of academic scholarship.` Sure enough, when the FT review appeared, it began with `How marvellous that a Pakistani Muslim...  This first book led to an invitation to speak at a colloquium on Pahari painting convened at the Los Angeles County Museum in September 1977. On the way back from the United States, my wife and Istopped in London.  We walked down New Bond Street and there, in the two showcases flanking the entrance of Sotheby`s, were countless copies of my book. It was a he a r ts t o p p ing moment. To my chagrin, that was the one day I had neglected to carry my camera with me.Such memories never lose their piquancy.  However, one that is singularly special is when I revisited the famous antiquarian book-dealer Maggs Bros in London`s Berkeley Square. Its owner, Mr Clifford Maggs, had been a prime source of out-ofdate research books for me. He had provided many miniatures which formed the core of my personal collection. Mr Clifford received us and then asked me to sign my book for his library. He steered me to a desk near the window, then sat me in the chair at a weathered table. That table, I 1(new, had been the one on which Charles Dickens had written Pickwick Papers. There could not have been a more civilised, subtle, unspoken compliment to an incipient author.  During the biennale, Mr Gibbs told me that Sotheby`s no longer had a copy of my book. I gave him one, reattaching a connection with Sotheby`s that began 43 years ago. The writer is an author and historian.  www.fsaijazuddin.pk |