

Dynamic, ancient beauty of India overwhelms touring artist Jean Charlot

By Jean Charlot

Today is an anniversary, a very special anniversary for me. I arrived in India a week ago.

I will tell you now what my first ideas are concerning India. That seems a bold thing to do after being only a week in such a large and complex country. But there are two ways of knowing. One way, we know the facts, we find them in books or by experience. The other way of knowing is what I would call "shock knowledge." It comes to us in a kind of inspiration.

In shock knowledge it is not so much the rational part of our mind that is at work. To give an example. Let's say you have been visiting a friend. He tells you, "I have seen a woman, she is more like a vision from heaven than like a woman. Her lips are rubies. Her teeth made of pearls. I wish I knew her better!" You go away on a long trip, you come back, you see the same friend and ask, "What happened to the woman who was like a vision from heaven?" He is rather casual about it: "What wom-

Editor's Note: Jean Charlot, professor emeritus of art at the University of Hawaii, and his wife are on a month-long tour, wandering at will over the world, seeing new places at times revisiting at other places Charlot last saw in his youth.

an? Oh! You mean my wife."

SHOCK KNOWLEDGE as a first impression is not to be disdained. Then after many days, and nights too, we acquire factual knowledge.

I do not have any factual knowledge of India but I already have shock knowledge. And shock knowledge can be sound knowledge.

India to the tourist is a vision from heaven. He has seen the Red Fort by sunrise and the Taj by moonlight. When the tourist enthuses about your country, you, Indians, are a little reserved. You say, "I would not know. I live here." Or to be blunt, you add: "I am a tax payer."

Strangely enough, the artist's point of view comes closer to that of the resident than to that of the tourist.

Mr. Charlot before his trip wrote weekly on art for the Star-Bulletin. Now he returns to our columns via this observation on Indian art made in a Nov. 19 speech to the Rotary Club of Saharanpur, India.

An artist should not look for perfect sights. It is the job of the artist to create beautiful things rather than to look at beautiful things.

I shall now try and tell you what kind of things attracted me in India, choosing from my very meager store of Indian experiences.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS we did was to take an early morning train in Old Delhi, on our way to Saharanpur. We were on our way there to visit our good friends, Prem and Prakash Gupta, and their famed Manilikey rose garden.

It was an early train and we arrived at the station too early. So we sat and looked through the window of the car at the hustle and bustle in the station. There were many picturesque things to look at but what interested me most was a bunch of sacking, piled over something quite motionless. After five minutes or so it started moving. A rather elderly gentleman rose up. He had been sleeping. He was still in a dream world. As he took consciousness of where he was and what he was, he deftly tied a red scarf around his loins, knotted high a red turban over his head, and secured a metal plaque with a number on it at his armpit. He was one of the certified porters at the station. Minutes after, he had found a client and was trotting around with pieces of luggage on his head, a perfect sight for tourists, a perfect subject for their cameras.

The pangs of creativity I had felt when I first looked at the old man faded out as he transformed himself into a picturesque character. An artist has to create his own beauty. The beauty that is ready made, that is chewed up and already digested is not for the artist but for the art lover.

BEFORE COMING TO INDIA we passed through Greece, the cradle of our Western classical culture.

One approaches Greece with a head full of the marble beauty of perfect men and women, as sculptured by the ancient artists. It comes as a surprise that Greek people, like any other, are tall or short, thin or fat, with long noses or short noses. Greeks do not look like Greek marbles. They never did, even in antiquity.

The famed Greek beauty came out of the head of the artists, and to see it they started by closing their eyes to the outside world.

You, Indians, should be proud that your country is one of the few countries of the world that also created an undying ideal of beauty. The artists of your own antiquity, the sculptors of Ellora and the painters of Ajanta created a type of beauty equal to that of Greece, but different. The Greek beauty is static. The Indian beauty is dynamic. It also is a beauty artists could see only with their eyes closed, the better to create order out of the beautiful disorder of nature.

In the days when Ellora and Ajanta were created, artists were, as they always are, a very small minority. The stage was filled with important dictators bent on conquest, generals proud of their victories. The contact between artist and conqueror must have been slight. To the politician and the military man, artists appear as idle men, as escapists. Imagine the artists chiseling the sculpture of Ellora or brushing in the frescoes of Ajanta: Perched on rickety scaffolds, they turned their back on the world.

TWO THOUSAND YEARS LATER, the values are reversed. Generals and conquerors are forgotten. Conquests and victories are now meaningless. There only remains, as alive as ever, the beauty created by the artists.

As happens with the Western world, where classical art is a common denomina-

tor of many diverse cultures, India may find its unity in its own brand of classical art.

Another one of my Indian experiences: we went to Mussoorie to have a look at the Himalayas. On the way we found an elephant gathering its own fodder, passing it up to its guardian perched on its back. Our friends the Guptas knew of our ambition to ride an elephant.

They talked to its keeper. The fodder was replaced by a platform and we rode like rajahs through the village street. It gave the people watching us a good time and also to us a good time.

Besides, I for a moment felt in a creative mood. It was not a visual experience. I was not going to devote myself to the painting of elephants. It was close to a musical experience, though soundless. I felt the slow movement of the elephant as a kind of drum beat. At each step he seemed to root himself, as his weight pressed on the earth. For a moment I felt that I was caught inside a great banyan tree, shooting its roots down in the ground.

Through such non-visual experiences, if I stayed long enough in India, I could come to paint something meaningful. Not through any sightseeing, however beautiful the sights.

I FELT FOR AN INSTANT that I was going through the same motions as the ancient artists went through before they could abstract out of the visual disorder of India great ordered symbols, such as those of the Wheel and the Dance.

An artist is never satisfied by simply looking. The Taj Mahal is first of all the work of an artist. Before the tourist could admire it in the moonlight, the artist had to close his eyes and see the Taj in his mind's eye.

One of our good Indian friends, Dr. S. K. Saksena, who taught Indian philosophy at the University of Hawaii, wrote in our guest book a phrase in Sanscrit that he was kind enough to translate into English.

This Sanscrit saying sums up both the wisdom of past artists and the more personal feelings that I, as an artist, experienced in my very short stay in India. "Beauty renews itself every moment."



Mr. and Mrs. Jean Charlot