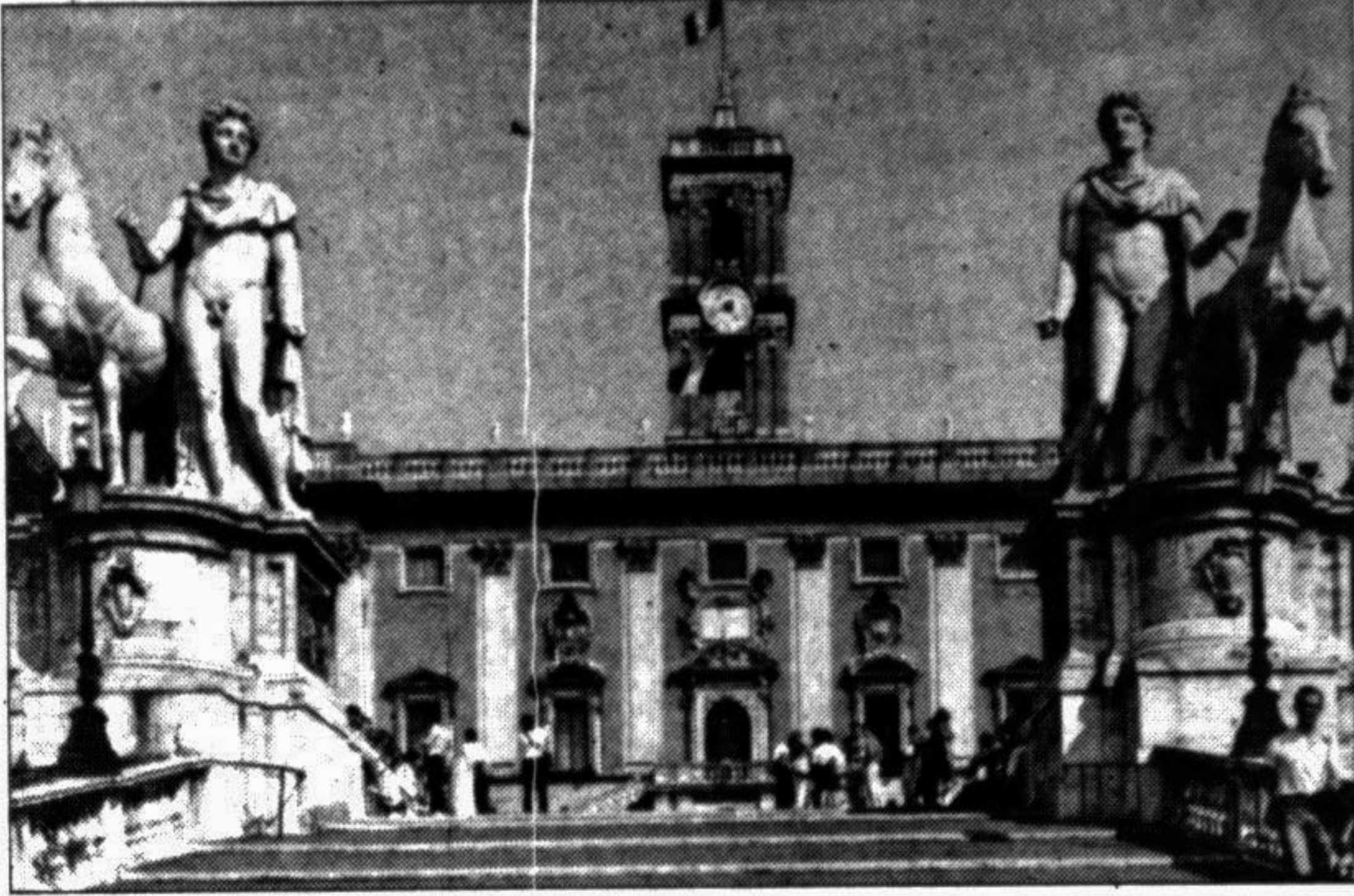


Ruminations from Rome

by Neeman A Sobhan



The Capitol

WHEN some of my over zealous Rome visitors, who invariably arrive in sweltering July, have thoroughly "done" the cities art and historical treasures (plus their guide) to a crisp — and this may have included hours cloistered in, say, the Christian, Profane and Ethnological Missionary Museum or looking, in a quasi-supine position, for Pope Julius' profile, rumoured to be sculpted in the luxuriant beard of Michelangelo's "Moses" — some have been known to voice half-nurtured ambitions to "do" Pompeii as well. Now I have nothing against Pompeii as such, but I am not sufficiently suicidal to relish the thought of trudging miles of arid ruins under a punishing sun, for the twenty-third time! At this point usually, I niftily try to sell what I call my "lazy man's Pompeii". I could have called it the "poor man's Pompeii" as well, but the riches of this place almost equal a Herculaneum to the imaginative tourist. Also it is so much closer, and may I add, that much shadier! Next to Fatehpur Sikri, this is my favourite ruined city: Ostia Antica.

Less than half an hour from Rome, this used to be Ancient Rome's commercial and military port. The comparison to Akbar's city is justified because, although Ostia, like Pompeii and Herculaneum, is a remarkable example of a Roman town, however, unlike them it was not destroyed but, like Fatehpur Sikri, was abandoned. Epidemic of Malaria drove out the inhabitants of this once flourishing port city; an odd quirk of history and biology that a puny anopheline community should have managed to drive but a powerful anthropological one, hundreds of times its size!

Founded in fourth century BC by King Arcus Martius (a historical persona of whom I readily admit to being shamelessly ignorant), Ostia was the first colony of Rome on the sea and then one of its most important ports. The meaning of its name, "mouth of river" declares that once upon a time it was washed by the Tiber. During Emperor Constantine's time it reached its maximum expansion of over 100,000 inhabitants.

In talking of Ostia we have to make a clear distinction between Ostia Antica and the present day Ostia, which is a popular but shabby seaside town further down. The excavated area of ancient Ostia abounds in numerous ruins and reminders of this burgeoning commercial city of times past: public and private buildings, streets, defensive walls and harbours. For tourists, a leisurely day of strolling around Ostia Antica provides a relaxing alternative to a day visiting museums and galleries.

A tour of the grounds, strewn with the remains of public buildings, important monuments, and private structures both humble and luxurious, can be of consuming interest not only to the student of Roman Art and Architecture or the devotee of Ancient

Roman urban planning, but anyone with a feel for history. In Ostia Antica one can visit, among other things, the offices of shipping merchants, where one can still see mosaic floors depicting ships in harbour and the name of the ports of call. These offices are in the square of the corporation. Well preserved and interesting to visit also are, the blocks of store-houses, firemen's barracks, as well as the imposing theatre built by Augustus, which may have resounded often with the comedies of Plautus. The Baths of the Forum, the Capitolium, built high on a podium, by Hadrian, and the Temple of Rome and Augustus are also worthy of close scrutiny. Most sightseers find the residential streets even more fascinating because they bring to life a real world of ordinary people. Private dwellings of wealthy owners, like the House of Amor and Psyche or the House of the Painted Vault, obviously attract many visitors because of the statues, decorations and rare architectural features, like the nymphaeum, which was a wall at one end of an inner garden, composed of a row of niches fronted by arches springing from small Corinthian columns. Of private houses of earlier periods little remains, but it is conjectured that they would resemble houses in Pompeii with atrium and peristyle garden. The other, more modest but evocative houses of merchants, shopkeepers and ordinary citizens, specially the tenement buildings like the House of Diana are valuable texts in which to read the economic and social stratification of the city. Much has been written about Roman tenement-buildings, and it is in Ostia that the most substantial evidence of this sort of structures are available. Reconstructed models reveal that, a typical apartment block could be five-storey high. The flats were

probably quite plain looking and functional; they were mostly reached from courtyards or from the street by stairs running between shops on the ground floors; there seems to have been no private sanitation nor structural heating. There are, in my opinion, two ways to see any pile of history, and Ostia Antica is no exception: with one's nose in a guide book or in the spirit of "the true adventurer" who, in O Henry's definition, "goes forth aimless...." Obviously, when I go alone there is no question regarding my stance, its only when I take my Pompeii-diverted visitors do I make sure that no stone is left unturned, so to speak, in giving my friends a comprehensive idea of this place, lest they feel shortchanged! But my preferred method is a happy combination of guidance and laissez-faire. That is, I give my visitors elaborate instructions and directions, and then, with further reinforcement of maps and books, I push them onwards. Meanwhile, I either find a shady spot for myself, where I can dream among the ruins, or I wander aimlessly around the private houses, stopping at a crumbled courtyard here, touching a moth-eaten wall there, stepping over a threshold, or mounting a few mysterious flights of stairs that end abruptly in midair, leading nowhere. For me it is this residential environment that I find the faint but persistent pulse of bygone lives. On many an empty afternoon, while sitting on a broken step of a roofless room, I think I surmise the life of the ordinary man and woman who lived here: I smell the fragrance of fresh baked bread in the gutted bakery next door; I hear the sound of children playing in the silent street or the hum of voices in the *taberna* or bar

with its dusty counter; and suddenly, the entire history of the humble populace seems to me to be whispered by the sea-spiced breeze among the pines and cypresses. Let the archaeologist and historian keep his details. To me, the romance of a ruined city, is not necessarily in the structures themselves, in the revealed or concealed splendour of its remains, rather, I feel it is in the mystique of its very presence. Its undefined shape as a messenger from lost times, telling us stories of the long gone days. Above everything, I feel that it reminds us that this ghost town, like other dead cities of the past, once existed, and although it is no more, neither is it completely wiped out, obliterated from the collective memory of the world; in leaving behind traces of its existence, its footprints, the spirit of the city has defied negation and is with us today, with me this afternoon. And thus I love to sit, under the peristyle of a vanished villa, absorbing the atmosphere of this long departed city, contemplating the history of, not just this particular Roman town but, all the nameless cities of countless civilisations of the past; I wonder at the remarkable sameness of the basic story it tells of our collective and individual passage through life, and the heroic audacity with which the human spirit attempts, again and again, to build its sandcastles against the forces of destruction, tries to carve a permanent niche on the elusive surface of time. I think of the Stone Age cave paintings discovered recently in France, and I exult: nothing is ever lost! Whether Ostia Antica or Mohenjodaro, Petra or Moynamoti, Machhu Pichhu or Fatehpur Sikri, every ruin is a monument to the spirit of man, the builder and creator of cities, of dreams.

Head-on Collisions

The Passing Show

by Alif Zabr

ALMOST daily we hear or read about head-on vehicle collisions. The cumulative number of people killed or maimed is quite large annually. The administrative measures taken are neither stringent enough nor publicised adequately. There are two issues to watch: the public confidence is shaken, and a sense of insecurity has set in. That is the effect on the public and the passengers. The other issue is that the deterrent measures taken by the administration do not seem to have had any effect on the drivers (and the owners); as the accidents continue unabated, and show no sign of declining. The head-on collisions are more due to human error than bad maintenance and roadability of the vehicles. As for the bad roads simply adjust the driving to the road conditions. Certain routine statements have been made by the higher ups to tackle this "killer" epidemic. The long-term measures of increasing the traffic police staff and introducing patrols on the highways, and making better roads will take time to exert effect and show better results. Where is the "crash programme" to contain this menace; and what are these measures? It is not possible to post

an inspector or police in every moving public vehicle, truck or bus; and the frightened passengers are not supposed to give directions to the driver (any way, he won't listen). The psychology of the drivers must be studied by the experts and the causes revealed on this peculiar type of behaviour pattern of driving dangerously a 200HP vehicle travelling at high speed (the momentum force even at 25mph is very high). All drivers (with some years of experience) develop a safe sense of judgement and foresight in sizing up moving traffic situations while driving in the city or on the highway. There are many types of traffic accidents, but head-on collisions are normally rare; and these can be avoided just by playing safe, and by not taking uncertain risks during passing or overtaking. The bus/truck drivers are presumed to be well experienced in their professional capacity;

therefore the number of accidents should not be above the normal or average figure. Safe driving practice is independent of the traffic flow, the type of vehicle, and the speed; as the safe-driving rules apply in all cases at all times. The basic standard driving practices are taught during the training period before the driving license is issued. Two situations arise: was the training right; and was the licence rightly issued? There may be administrative and supervisory loopholes or lapses in these two areas (nepotism, corruptions, negligence of duty, etc). The role of the owners of the vehicles can play an important part in curbing this dangerous nuisance. What part is being played by the owners of the vehicles, and the trade unions of owners and drivers in controlling the situation? They also have some moral responsibility towards the public. Why are they silent? The insurance compensation is easy

to get, considering the "freedom" granted to the drivers by the owners in the misuse of the vehicle while driving irresponsibly? Beside the technical and administrative sides, the social aspects have to be studied by the specialists in combating this menace. It is sad to note the apathy of the administration in rousing public opinion on the high rate of traffic accidents in the country. The official silence is most discouraging, compared to the slightest nuances of political news printed by the media. Life is cheap in this country, isn't it? Why the drivers are defiant? No driver is willing to give the right of way to the other. Similar confrontational stands we see in the political field, causing crisis after crisis. Should the lead, and the way out, come from the political leaders? Perhaps there is some link between road accidents and political stances, as the people imitate the leaders of the society. Before providing accommodation on the road, accommodation in the heart is necessary. First the mental attitude, then the physical provision. Perhaps these drivers are teaching us something (reverse feedback). *The writer is an ex-rally driver.*

INDIA may operate nuclear power plants, launch satellites and use computer technology as if to the manner born. But do you know that of the 600 million Hindus who inhabit this land, at least 590 million still rely on astrological gurus and their ancient charts for guidance on how to run their lives?

Moreover, those who leave their fate to the stars come from all walks of life — government officials, politicians, diplomats, tycoons, pedicab drivers, movie stars and every other individuals. Many of them cannot even go to market without consulting his or her favourite seer.

The things these people talk about with their astrologers are many and diverse. No longer are they satisfied with knowing just when to hold a party, or get married, or start a business, and so forth. They may also want to find out if their pet dog or cat should be weaned on curried chicken or fish entrails, or if their car will not break down on a trip, or if their race horse should run in next Sunday's derby.

For instance, top scientists, who would seem to be the last people on earth who would consult an astrologer, are known to check their astral charts before they launch a major science project. It is rumoured that even Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, a devout Brahmin, has inklings of what the stars have in store for him when he goes abroad or makes a major policy statement in Parliament.

But to turn to dogs, cats and even horses. There are two quite popular astrologers in Delhi — Geets Sen and Pundit S Nanjundaiah — who have launched a new astrological trend in which the ancient scriptures are being applied to pets and modern machines.

A person can even have a horoscope for a Maruti car to see if a projected trip will be safe — all for a tidy sum of US\$10.



Knowing Your Car through its Zodiac Sign

I have made horoscopes for cars using both numerological as well as astrological calculations," says Mr Nanjundaiah seriously, claiming that such consultations have shown a marked upswing in recent times.

Mr Nanjundaiah explains his method. "The birth is at the moment you purchase it," he says. He adds a helpful hint for the many whose vehicles are obtained through a bank loan: "In this case, the birth occurs when you pay the first instalment."

By consulting planetary configurations in vehicular matters, he advises his clients when not to travel in certain directions, when to buy and sell cars for certain gain and, most interestingly, how to thwart fate.

A case in point is that of a lady from Jhansi whose Maruti van met with three accidents, the last resulting in six deaths. "The distraught lady wanted to sell her van but could find no buyers so she asked me for help," Mr Nanjundaiah said.

His advice? "Paint the car parrot green and drive it fearlessly."

The lady is still driving her car much more safely now. Perhaps, the changed numerology — green has a number — helped right the balance.

So — choose a number plate which coincides with your birthdate," advises Mr Nanjundaiah, as he offers another tip: "Don't drive under the adverse aspect of Mars."

And the dogs and cats? Ah, they can save your life. Specially if Brownie, your pet beagle, is, well, brown.

"One of my clients had death written in his charts," says Mr Nanjundaiah as an example. "He went into hospital with a serious cardiac condition. I advised him to keep a brown dog, because brown corresponds with No. 2."

The client survived but his dog died because "it had taken on the evil eye from its master." The sequence was repeated thrice before certain death was erased from his stars.

Centuries ago, it seems, one of the ancient Hindu holy scriptures, called Shakuna Shastra, examined the astrological links between men and animals.

For example, temple elephants and king's horses were chosen on the bases of royal characteristics.

The South Indian Maharajas, who were more particular about such matters, believed that the king's fate in war depended on his horse.

But now, as one Maharaja says, "they can't keep horses in cities. So, they have 800 horse-power cars instead."

Astrologer Geeta Sen is a rational person. Forty years old and highly educated, Ms Sen does not consult astrology only as a hobby. In fact, she has the diplomatic corps as her client.

She has particularly advised men and women clients to befriend animals.

She says: "Feed slum children and household pets and even stray cats and dogs at

noon when they are hungry. People must also give food to village idiots and corpse bearers at Hindu cremation grounds as these people have immunity to disease. They are also close to the divine."

According to Ms Sen, these people absorb your bad luck. Ms Sen also persuades people to adopt orphans, for this might appease the angry planets.

But the learned astrologer, who lives in a village next to the diplomatic district of Vasant Vihar, is particularly keen on cows.

Earlier, people have sought astrological advice for suitable names for these animals. Now they want to consult the stars for artificial insemination.

"We used to give them (cows) names like Ganga and Jamuna so that they could yield milk as the river goddesses provide water," Ms Sen said.

For astrologers, there is also immense potential in race horses. Owners, punters, and everyone have a chance to make money if only they are astrologically correct.

If the horse's birthdate coincides with that of the jockey and the date on which the race is run, bet your bottom rupee. You will break the banks. However, in the absence of an authentic birth certificate, the horse, like the car discussed earlier, can be considered "born" on the moment of purchase.

"Black is the colour of Shani," Mr Nanjundaiah warns, "very inauspicious." But he also says that the black cat crossing your path is nothing to worry about.

Now that's the kind of unpredictable logic guaranteed to whet your appetite for further predictions from your friendly neighbourhood star-gazer. Science comes up with new discoveries, astrology aficionados, it seems, will not be left behind in discovering newer applications for the ancient practice. — *Depthnews Asia*

Zanabazar, the Sculptor and Buddha Incarnate of the Mongols

by Pascale Teinac

HE was called Zanabazar, a name that nobody, apart from a few rare scholars knew. He was a spiritual leader of the Mongols and a descendant of Genghis Khan. He lived from 1635 to 1723, which is an exceptionally long lifespan in those distant steppes, and was the "First living Buddha of Uрга", also known as "Ondur Gegen", "the Very High and Greatly Enlightened".

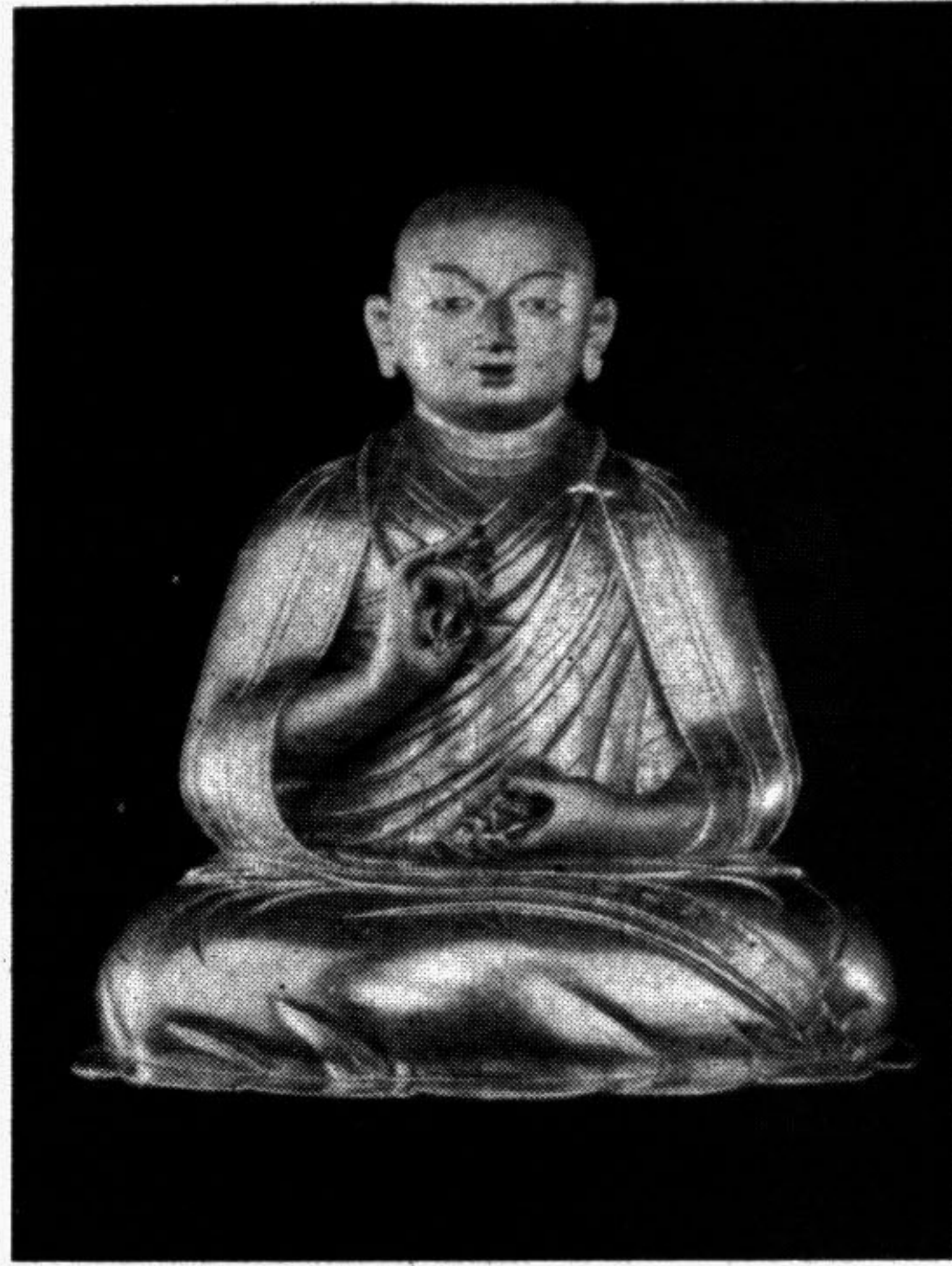
Zanabazar is emerging from the shadows thanks to the exhibition about the "Treasures of Mongolia" which, for the first time, have left the museums of Ulan Bator (formerly Uрга) and the big monasteries of Mongolian Tantric Buddhism, also known in the West as Lamaist Buddhism.

The revelation is all the more spectacular as, for more than 65 years, the Communist regime, which had, in 1924, proclaimed the "People's Republic of Mongolia", a satellite of the Soviet Union, had done all it could to eliminate any trace of religion, with temples razed, works of art destroyed in thousands and monks exterminated. A few works were, however, deposited in museums. Others, which had been hidden by the faithful, are beginning to reappear and a few monasteries which have survived are opening their doors once more and revealing their treasures.

Mongolia had been converted to reformed Buddhism of Tibetan origin in the second half of the 16th century. Prince Zanabazar, a great figure in Mongolian history, who has always been worshipped by the people, revealed such exceptional gifts right from his early childhood that he was considered as a sacred incarnation and he was made to take his vows at the age of three. At the age of 14, he set off for Tibet where he was initiated by the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama both of whom confirmed that he was the incarnation of the Tibetan scholar Taranatha, who had died in Mongolia before his birth.

On his return to Mongolia, Zanabazar was extremely active as a builder and as a translator

A Buddha incarnate who is also a diplomat, a builder, a writer, a poet, a translator and, above all, a brilliant sculptor is not a common thing. Here is one who has just come from the outer reaches of the Mongolian steppes to the Guimet museum in Paris, for the length of a superb exhibition which is, itself, a big first.



of sacred texts, founding numerous monastic communities and, as told by the director of the Ulan Bator Fine Arts Museum, even inventing "an extraordinary alphabet for the phonetic transcription of Mongolian, Tibetan and Sanskrit, but which was not taken up as it was so complicated". But his activity as a sculptor is what made him most famous although complete mystery remains about the organisation of the studio that he founded. A gilded bronze portrait statue of him, coming from this studio, shows him sitting in the diamond position, holding the "diamond thunderbolt" and the bell, which are the distinctive signs of the supreme Buddha. He has a round face, his ears stick out a little and he has a jovial and serene smile.

The Unusual Charm of the 21 Statues of the Goddess Tara

Of the forty known works by the Mongol master, eleven made the journey to Paris. These are superb gilded bronze statues, made in a single casting, following a special

technique, and fixed to the pedestal by fine soldering. The clothes and jewellery are covered in bright gold while the flesh is painted in mat gold with light polychrome touches on the faces.

The goddesses sculpted by Zanabazar are so different from the Tibetan or Mongolian style of the period that popular legend has it that the sculptor was married and that the 21 statues of the goddess Tara that he left behind, were sculpted after the death of his wife and each of them bears the features and expressions of the deceased.

One of these statues, Cyamata, the "Green Tara", shows a delightfully swaying hip which is unusual in the art of the Far-East but which, according to the curator of the exhibition, Gilles Beguin, takes its origins in Neware (Nepal) statue art of the 16th and 17th centuries. Another of Zanabazar's masterpieces shows a statue of the god Samvara holding his lady-companion in his arms in an elegant and modest pose.

The fifty or so works presented at the exhibition in the Guimet museum in Paris also include Mongolian sculptures and paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries and jewellery and ritual items (such as the extraordinary "black hat", crowned with death's heads worn by those officiating at the mimed rituals of Lamaist Buddhism, or the masks and aprons of the dancers).

Superb applique work shows that the Mongols had brought this art to its apogee. The technique consists in cutting out pieces of material (generally silk imported from China) according to the shapes and colours wanted and then juxtaposing them to form a kind of mosaic. The pieces are stitched together or sewn onto a background and braid, often made of horse-hair or yak hair mixed with threads of gold or silver, conceal the seams and decorate the edges.

The exhibition is accompanied by a superb catalogue. It is the first work on Mongolian art published in the West.

— *L'Actualite En France*

A Craft of Delicacy : Filigree with a Reference to Dhaka

Continued from page 9

played but, as elsewhere, it was alloyed with a small amount of lead before being used. It is drawn into flat wire and subsequently twisted on itself to give it the appearance of minute ropes or strings. The wire is thus first drawn and then pressed into different shapes, the smaller one being directly moulded into various designs while the large ones are made up of smaller components pieced together. The last one had to be dexterously handled to make it uniform and harmonious. Let us take an example. The

frame of a leaf or a petal having been made in silver, this was given to one of the boys who cut the wire into certain required lengths. Each of these he seized between the forefingers and the thumbs and turned one end round in the form of a half-roll. He then impinged the wire within the frame and added one after another until the interior was packed as full as it would hold of rolled up wire. It was then passed on to the master silversmith who sprinkled it with a soldering salt, placed it on a piece of mica and then held it in the furnace until the pack-

ing of wire became soldered together and to the frame. The skill lies in not causing the solder to fuse over more than the desired points of attainment. Leaf by leaf and petal by petal being thus prepared, they are then welded together in the desired form. The process of cleaning and whitening the silver is one of great interest but more or less a secret of the craft. The silver filigree work that was in vogue in Dhaka was said to have been introduced here only during the beginning of the 19th century. But it is learnt that there existed in

Dhaka even at the time of Mughal Emperor Jahangir a sort of filigree work of a very superior quality called "Mandila". This was heavier than those produced during the 19th century. The silver filigree works of the time of Jahangir were said to be as fine as human hair, broken into pieces and fixed together in patterns. It disappeared shortly after the arrival of the English, owing most probably to its heavy prices. As is reported by the "Journal of Indian Art and Industry", no "Mandila" work could be exhibited in the Delhi exhibition of

Indian Arts held in the 80s of the 19th century. The filigree works of Dhaka of the 19th century were done by a caste called "Suvarna-banikya" who lived in Nababgunge and Choudhuri Bazar. They obtained pure silver from old ornaments and by washing the ashes of the furnaces of silver-smiths. The pure silver prepared by them in small bars which were beaten and made round and then drawn through holes perforated in a piece of flat steel called "Jantri" till silver wire of the regulated thickness was obtained. The wire was fine or

coarse in accordance with the design to be made. These wires were then passed into the hands of the "Karmakar" class. The "Shankhari" (shell-cutter) and "Tanti" (weaver) castes of Dhaka also worked at this trade but they were not so efficient in it. It is said that the design used to be drawn out on paper by the "Karmakar". A frame work of silver wire was made according to the paper-design to serve as a support for the inner work. The leaves, flowers, stem etc. were made separately by twisting their wires together and beating or press-

ing them into the required shape. The leaves etc. had then to be soldered to the frame-work. The process of soldering was done like this: A solution of borax and water was placed in a vessel over a fire and boiled till only finely powdered borax remained. Silver strips having 3/16 to 5/16 of alloy (copper and zinc or tin) were then placed in a separate vessel and covered with the powdered borax. The silver flowers etc. were steeped in borax solution. The frame-work was then taken. The alloy silver strips were placed on those parts of the frame-work to which the silver flowers were to be attached and then flowers were placed on the alloy silver strips. The

frame-work with the strips and leaves in position was then heated over a small furnace and the soldering was completed. The finishing touches were put with pliers, wire-nippers etc. Some filigree work was also made of gilt. Gilding was first applied at the time of Jahangir to the "Mandila" work. The process is as follows: Gold leaf was cut into the required sizes, the part to which gilding was to be applied was heated, the leaf was laid on and heat was again applied until the leaf was smoothly and firmly fixed. The following instruments were used in making filigree works: *Bauli*, a spindle, *Charhi*, winder made of wood. *Continued on page 12*