

belles-lettres

A Self-made Man

by Andaz

This letter was written to a new daughter-in-law, who lost her father-in-law within weeks of her wedding, to introduce a self-made man she ought to have known for the rich qualities of his head and heart.

Dear S—,

The joy of your wedding was marred by the fatal illness of your father-in-law immediately after the reception ceremony. It is a pity you were denied the opportunity to spend a couple of years with a personality rich in the qualities of the head and heart.

He looked unassuming. The word 'personality' looked too strong for him! That was the secret. He hid his qualities, as great artists hide their talent in their masterpieces. To the unacquainted, from the outside, he looked like an ordinary person, whom one would not give a second glance, in contrast to the suited, booted, and well-heeled jet executives who thrust their personalities on those around them.

Yet, this Matriculate son of the soil rose from a factory worker in a foreign country to an industrialist, and left behind in London a bungalow worth half a million pounds, and a vintage Jaguar,

which you would be sharing with your husband and mother-in-law. As you know, he sent his son to Oxford and Cambridge.

Finding employment prospects bleak in his country (now Bangladesh), he was one of the earliest migrants to the UK in the late 1950's. For sometime he hopped from job to job, till he decided to set up a restaurant. Within a short period he had a hand in several restaurants. Thereafter there was a boom in Bangladeshi restaurants in the UK; and he prospered.

In the process he started helping others in his community, both abroad and at home. He played a key role in organising the Bangladeshi Caterers' Association of Great Britain. Now more than 90 per cent of the Indian style restaurants are owned by Bangladeshis. His community work in UK was recognized, and on several occasions your in-laws were received by HM The Queen.

He led a quiet life of plain living and high thinking. His personality was so unobtrusive and benevolent that all relatives, near or distant, liked him, and welcomed his visits, which is a rare type of praise in our community. He used to commute several times a year between

London and Bangladesh, and made it a point to contact and say a friendly hello to as many people as possible.

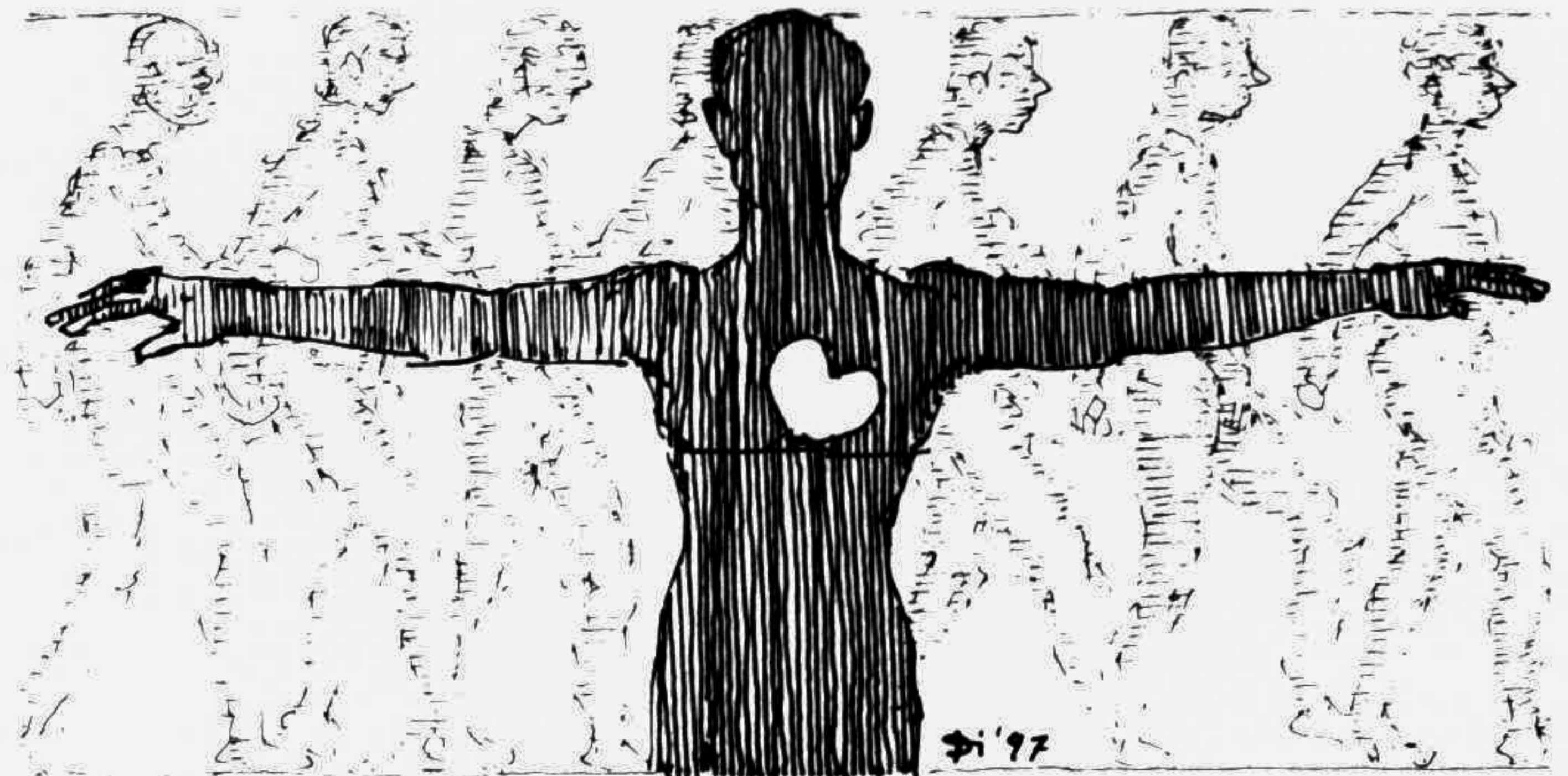
His home in London became a sort of a transit camp for the visiting near and dear ones. So expansive was their hospitality (even when his means were meagre), that his popularity sometimes bred jealousy and criticism in others. It was understandable, but regrettable. It hurt him, but he never took it seriously. He was a big-hearted man — beyond his boundary.

While his amiability attracted, his simplicity endeared him to all. He was not the high-brow or intellectual type, hence simple souls were not intimidated in his presence. He could mix easily with all, at all levels. His nobility displaced his egotism, and his pride was humbled by his service. His conviviality was infectious, even to the taciturn spirit.

You would have loved his gentle and homely company; and sometimes enjoyed the artlessness of his simplicity. He was not the complicated type, usually shunned by the majority.

You have missed the greatness of a 'small' man.

— Dharitri Feature.



art

The Studios of Famous Painters in France

The studios of dead painters, which are emotion-filled places of work, bring those who went through the throes of creativity and the joys of successful work alive, more than the best of books.

by Pierre Albert Lambert

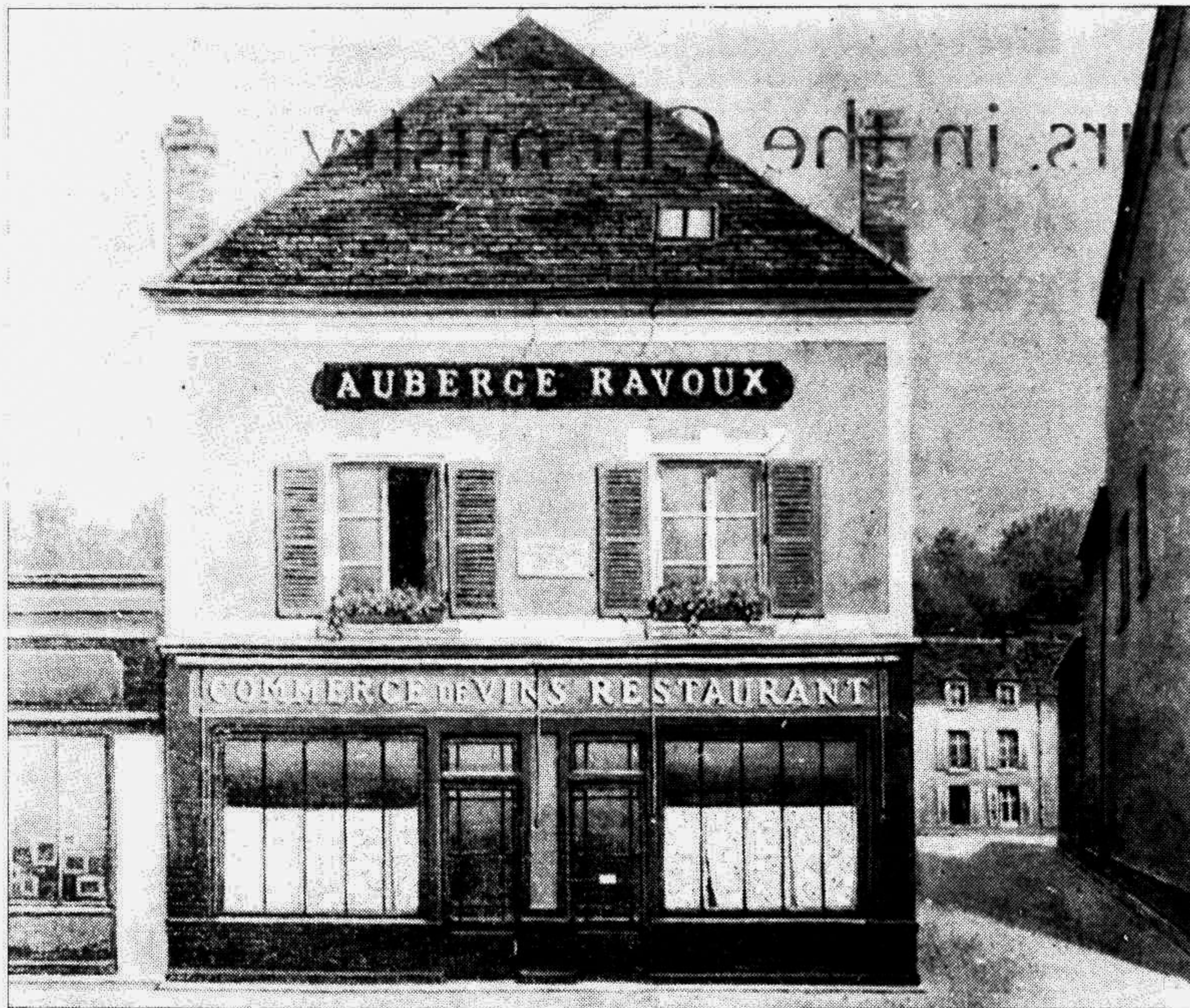
CLAUDE Monet's house in Giverny ranks first among the artists' studios which have become museums and which attract the most visitors in France. It has been restored to the way that the master of Impressionism left it when he died one evening in 1926. This former barn, one hour from Paris between the Ile-de-France region and Normandy, stands next to his pretty house with its pink roughcast walls and green shutters.

In front of the large picture windows letting in the light, lie the gardens that Monet lovingly tended. They are a palette of colours which change with the seasons. One quite expects to come across the artist, with his patriarch-like beard, down a path, attempting to fix the delicate nuance of his waterlilies.

Another world-famous studio and garden is in Cagnes-sur-Mer on the French Riviera. It is the villa called Les Collettes where Auguste Renoir spent his last years. It contains a number of souvenirs such as the special armchair, with poles attached to transport it, in which he was carried outside when, contorted with rheumatism, he heroically insisted on painting with a brush tied to his semi-paralyzed hand.

Provence, in the South of France, also has souvenirs of Cezanne. Three places, which are venerated by his admirers, tell the story of his life and work. First of all, in Aix, there is the house which bears his name and where he set up his first studio. It was given to the town by the United States Cezanne Committee and, today, it is more a place of pilgrimage than a museum.

Outside the old capital of Provence, the painter also lived in the Jas de Bouffan ('sheepfold of the wind'), a former 17th century hunting lodge bought by his father who was a banker. Paul Cezanne's studio, which was created in the loft, has been preserved thanks to the care of the present owners. "We feel a little like the



Maison Van Gogh

master's tenants", they joke as they kindly show visitors around.

Cezanne spent his last years in his third studio at Les Lauves. He had had it built among the olive trees, near the panorama of Mont Sainte-Victoire which fascinated him and which he reproduced so many times. It was there that, surprised by a storm while he was working, he was found unconscious one evening in October 1906.

Traces of Gustave Courbet can be found in various places in Franche-Comte, whose everyday life last century is illustrated in his paintings, especially in Ornans near Besancon, in the house where he was born. It contains a museum in which paintings, drawings and handwritten texts trace the brilliant, eventful destiny of this precursor of Manet and Monet who shook up the academic routine of the period.

— from Van Gogh to Picasso —

Another place which is marked by the stay of a great artist is the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise. It is located 35 kilometres north of Paris and has become the Maison Van Gogh. In 1890, with his folding easel on his shoulder, the sunflower painter would return to this inn for the night, after working all day in the surrounding countryside.

One evening in July, he shot himself in the chest at the edge of a field of wheat of which he was completing a painting. Then he returned to the inn and expired in the attic room on the first floor. In 1995, more than 110,000 French and foreign visitors of about fifteen nationalities including many Americans and Japanese came to pay their respects there.

Vincent Van Gogh lies next to his brother beneath a simple slab, in the shadow of the church of Auvers which he reproduced in a famous painting.

Closer to our time, Picasso, who could

not keep still, worked in a number of different studios, from the famous Bateau-Lavoir in Montmartre in Paris where, at the turn of the century, he led a bohemian life with other starving painters, to his sumptuous residence of Notre Dame de Vie in Mougins just behind Cannes, where he passed away in 1973.

But Picasso was, above all, found working in the former chapel of the Chateau de Vallauris, not far from Nice. For two years (1952-1954), he decorated its walls. We can imagine him perched on scaffolding, squat and suntanned in shorts and sandals, working away on War and Peace, his two finest frescos after Guernica.

Another place to visit is on the edge of Fontainebleau forest, 60 kilometres south of Paris. It is the Auberge Ganne in Barbizon which landscape painters, who are famous all over the world, frequented. After meticulous restoration, it has, since last year, once again presented its 19th century aspect.

Everything has been restored, from the rooms where the rowdy guests slept, the furniture which they painted and the walls which Corot, Millet, Diaz and others decorated with their drawings and their graffiti. Near the inn which has been turned into a museum and acting as an annex, stands the cottage where Theodore Rousseau, the leader of the Barbizon School, worked.

There are many other places in Paris and its region where art-lovers can find traces of their favourite painters. These include the studios of Delacroix and Gustave Moreau in the French capital, the studio of Maurice Denis, the leader of the Nabis movement, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and the strange chateau in By, a hamlet on the banks of the Seine upstream from Paris where Rosa Bonheur, the most famous animal painter of the 19th century, lived.

— L'Actualite en France

essay

Song of Freedom: An End to Revisionist History?

by Naeem Mohaiemen

Concluding part

WITH its footage of Mujib's speech, and shots of soldiers yelling his name, Mukti Gaan was blocked as a partisan and doctored version of history. The sequence with a radio playing Zia's speech soothed the BNP stalwarts, but here the film ran into the unique problem of being too authentic. In recent years, the BNP had started publicizing a staged version of the speech with the reference to Mujib cut out. But here was the original tape, recovered in Germany from a former employee of war-era Free Bengal radio, with the reference to Sheikh Mujib as 'great national leader' intact.

In the end, several factors worked in favour of the film. In 1995, the BNP government was engulfed by street protests

as part of a two-year opposition campaign demanding neutral elections. Facing diplomatic and military pressure to yield to the election demands, the government seemed to have lost appetite for a showdown over Mukti Gaan. Newspapers such as Bhorer Kagoj played a key role by running feature stories with stills from the film. The Censor Board clearly recognized that newspaper reports were building growing public awareness of a film that was being called a "masterpiece," but facing suppression from the Board. One Bengali poet, who assisted with the film, is of the opinion that the presence of an American, Tareque's wife Catherine, served as a powerful deterrent to the scissors-wallahs. This was no local production from struggling artists — the Masoods were well connected in New

York, and there was no doubt that Catherine would mobilize international opinion if the film did get banned. Already smarting from the Taslima Nasrin debacle in 1994, where the BNP seriously underestimated the scope of international attention, the government was anxious to avoid another confrontation. In the end, the film received the long-awaited certificate with no visible compromises from the film-makers.

As feared by the government, the film became a massive propaganda windfall for the Awami League. The film was shown to wildly enthusiastic and overflowing crowds of people all across the country. Screenings were preceded by crowds of young men yelling "Joi Bangla." The Awami League, quick to

recognize the huge publicity value the film had for them, distributed the film soundtrack to campaign offices. The government made half-hearted move to ban the film, starting with the Intelligence Forces' attempt to ban issues of Bhorer Kagoj carrying in-depth coverage of the film. But by then, public awareness of the film was too high for them to proceed further.

An End to Revisionist History?

Beyond the artistic value of Mukti Gaan, the release of the film is a landmark event in a country struggling to build a coherent version of its history. Over the last two decades, every government has suppressed discussions of the liberation war to protect its own vested interests — sometimes the civil

servants who stayed in their posts through the war, sometimes army officers who feared that glamorizing the war would help the Awami League, and sometimes the Islamists of Jamaat-e-Islami who had actively helped the Pakistan army in 1971 by forming militia and death squads. Now, following on the footsteps of Mukti and Channel 4 (UK)'s celebrated War Crimes Trial documentary, there is renewed interest in documenting the liberation war. At the same time, this upsurge coincides with the Awami League's recent election victory — its first time in power since Mujib's 1975 assassination. Suddenly, there is a rush to prove oneself a die-hard Mujibist — expect a flood of documentaries and books on the late leader to follow. Certainly a history of Bangladesh's liberation needs to in-

clude the Awami League and Sheikh Mujib's role in the struggle. But in the midst of all the fanfare, will anyone raise the uncomfortable questions about the inherent contradictions of a war fought with peasant cannon-fodder yet led by the bourgeoisie-dominated Awami League; about the deep-rooted distrust between the leftist guerillas and the pro-Mujib factions; the tacit understanding between Indira Gandhi and the AL about the need to destroy the Naxalite influenced Sarbahara Party; and the subsequent persecution of Jasad and other left forces by the post-1971 Mujib government? Without an analysis of all sides of a remarkably fluid struggle, a renewed interest in the history of Bangladesh's independence may not be substantially different from the propaganda exercises of the past.