

column : Parisien Portrait

Two Historical Auctions

by Raana Haider

France, it is often said, is a huge attic that from time to time empties itself of some of its contents.

"Going... going... gone. Sold at... French Francs." And the auctioneer hit hard his hammer. So proceeded the auction of lock, stock and barrel of the entire contents of the Hotel George V at 31 Avenue George V in Paris in November 1997. The super-prestigious hotel has changed hands. The new owner, Prince al-Waleed bin Talal bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, a nephew of King Fahd of Saudi Arabia, ordered the George V to close its doors on 1st November 1997 for a year of total restoration and refurbishment at an estimated 300 million francs (some \$50 million).

The George V opened in 1928 to the public (in a matter of speaking only), since its clientele were always the rich and famous; largely royalty, princesses, sheikhs, other royalty, actors, actresses, media personalities.... Its interior is of the turn-of-the-century style, Art Deco — sumptuous furnishings, plenty of light — all in all, one magnifique et grande interieure. Marlene Detreich and Cary Grant in earlier days and Harrison Ford in more recent times have graced its rooms. Only the bare walls of the Hotel George V with the nineteenth century front-facade of the building are to remain. The entire interior is to be gutted and redone from floor to ceiling which entails a clearing out of the building from bottom to top.

On auction are objects of art and furniture: paintings, frames, carpets, lights, curtains, chandeliers, crockery, cutlery, glassware, kitchen utensils, door grills, curtain pelmets, door knobs, clocks and anything else any luxurious hotel in Paris is equipped with. Buyers have a choice of some ten thousand articles. The sale has been assigned to Etude Tajan, noted Parisien auctioneers, Etude Tajan had, in fact, been conducting their prestigious auctions at the premises of the hotel for the past twenty years.

Having arrived at 31 Avenue George V some thirty minutes early, I joined a queue of already some two hundred people. Through the grapevine, I heard that there was a bomb alert in the building. Do I stay or do I go? No one moved, the queue continued to lengthen and after a prayer, I shuffled along in the queue. Following considerable pushing and shoving by surprisingly some elegant and elderly men and women, and a bag security check — we were in. There was a run down the stairs by some agile prospective buyers and a dash to grab seats. This was a no-holds barred situation. Each one for oneself. I spotted a front row seat and promptly deposited myself. For a first time attendant at an auction, this in itself was good fortune.

As Harriet W Rochefort writes in 'French Toast : A Humorous Tour of What Living in France is Really Like: "The Silent Pusher is an endemic Parisian phenomenon. He or she is generally someone who is unhappy about not being in front of you but is afraid to tell you directly.... In the market, at the bakery, but especially at the post office and banks where you could easily fossilize if you don't catch on to the great game of queuehopping, you must concentrate all your forces on defending your place in line."

The auction started. Two Louis XV arm chairs were hoisted on to a table. The evaluator said 1000 Francs. The auctioneer rattled off "1100, 1200 by the woman in red, 1400 says the woman to the left, 1800 by the woman with the shawl, 2000 by the young girl with the brown hair, 2500, 3000? Yes, sold at 3000 Francs to the happy lady with the red shawl."

A box of ten early twentieth century side light glass shades went from an estimated 500 Francs to be bought by a lady for 700 Francs. Another similar box, auctioned later in the afternoon, started at 200 Francs and went finally for 500 Francs. Buyer's luck. Four ivory

coloured, doubly-lined brocade curtains went for 2500 Francs, un bon marche (a good buy). Even a pair of badly stained curtains were sold. A five seater (Louis XV sofa set went from an estimated 2000 Francs to a sale at 12,500 Francs. A ghastly 8 foot high chrome light-stand sold for 2,500 Francs. Chacun a son gout (each one has their own taste). And so it went..... Some items were interesting and in good condition and many items looked somewhat shabby and out of place in a luxurious hotel. Perhaps the creme de la creme of the sale items had already been sold. Maybe, it is a good thing that Hotel George V is undertaking a top-bottom requirement. The final product remains to be seen.

When it rains, it pours.

My second visit to an auction occurred just two days later. Having experienced one, I went off to the second armed with an abundance of enthusiasm and as before, no cheque book. As observed at the George V auction, no cash appeared exchanged. Auction practice and etiquette perhaps demands no 'cash on sale'.

In my observer status, I had the good fortune to be invited to a historic auction of 'Important Drawings and Paintings of the Impressionist and Modern Period'. It was organized by the renowned French auctioneers, Druout and held at their prestigious premises at Druout-Montaigne on Avenue Montaigne, where are also to be found the haute couture fashion houses, such as Dior, Guicci and Givenchy.

I once again pushed my way in and in my thoughts, thanked my friend for providing excellent reserved seats. In the upstairs balcony was an international press of some 50 people, armed with TV cameras and video recorders. On the platform before us were seated twenty three persons, many of them with telephones placed before them. The auctioneer stood on the platform behind

a microphone. Behind him on the back wall, was a digital board listing French Francs, US\$, Pound Sterling, Swiss Francs and Japanese Yen. It was explained to me that there would be immediate conversion of the quoted price into the above-quoted international currencies. It was an awesome sight. I sat with my hands clenches tight. Any untoward movement and I could be in an immensely grave situation.

Promptly at 9 pm the auction of the private collection of the late Madame Julien Rouart started. She was the wife of the grandson of Berth Morisot, one of the few women painters of the Impressionist period. To be sold at this auction were twenty Berth Morisot paintings, two Degas, two Renoirs, A Gauguin, a Boudin, a Monet and other works of art of the Impressionist period. A rare and stunning collection was now to be sold individually to international buyers. The Mormottan Museum in the 16th Arrondissement of Paris houses another Rouart art collection. This collection, a donation, however, remains intact. The auctioneer prefaced the start of the sale with a few remarks on the rare and historic nature of this particular auction.

The first Berth Morisot painting estimated at 10,000 French Francs sold at 92,000 Francs. (Conversion 5.75 French Francs=\$1). 'Autumn in Bois de Boulogne' by Berth Morisot estimated at 150,000 Francs sold at 750,000 Francs. Her 'Seaside' in oil estimated at 820,000 Francs sold for over 2 million Francs. Another Berth Morisot, 'Two Women Seated' estimated at 220,000 Francs was sold at 2,250,000 Francs. Even an unsigned Berth Morisot sold for 1,550,000 Francs. Breathtaking.

Most buyers were not in the packed room, nor in the adjacent rooms with gigantic screens carrying live the sale. Most of the bids made were over the telephone — probably a billionaire in Tokyo or Los Angeles or a museum in New York. A most remarkable sight was

to see the offers made by the Druout representative on the platform over the telephone to the prospective buyer, may be some three thousand miles away and in a second committing \$1000... \$2000 over the top. And the digital currency conversion was taking place instantly on the board. Each time a painting crossed the million francs mark, there was a grand round of applause. Six out of Berth Morisot's twenty paintings crossed the million francs mark. The evening's sale exceeded twice the estimated sale price for the paintings.

Edgar Degas' pastel painting of 'Two Girls' sold close to \$5 million. Gauguin's oil painting, 'Horses in the Countryside' sold for over \$4 million. Auguste-Renoir's portrait of his son sold for 1,880,000 Francs after a nerve-wrecking purchase battle between two absentee buyers. The auctioneer looked and waved his hand to the left for a bid and immediately switched to the right as another desperate buyer bid over the telephone. We were switching our heads in time as well.

Souren Melikian in her reporting of 'A New Golden Age of Old Masters, in the International Herald Tribune similarly noted, "The impact of combined rarity and availability, enhanced by the freshness of works which had been out of the market for many years, or, in some cases, decades, stung collectors and dealers into bidding matches as rarely before.... This left Green (the winning bidder) with a huge 2.2 million Pound Sterling bill, more than double the highest estimate.... That evening, it became clearer than ever that professionals of his caliber and financial resources now feel that the time has come when an opportunity, if missed, is unlikely to repeat itself."

The French auction market is closed to foreign auctioneers i.e., international auction houses are unable to conduct sales in France. The practice changes in

1998 when Christies, Sotheby's and others extend their already existing presence to conducting sales themselves. In 'Demeures et Chateaux', a magazine devoted to the international arena of art, auctions and architecture, the president of Sotheby's, France, Princesse de Beauvan-Craon remarks that, "Paris can recover its reputation as the leading international market place for art, which was formerly the case up until the 50s. (New York is now the centre stage for auctions.).... In this sector, Paris can and must reassert itself as the historical and geographical centre of Europe. Fifty percent of the pieces put up for auction in the world are French."

At the close of the evening, I trooped out quite spellbound. So this is how 'these things' happen; i.e., 'those things' we often read about in the paper the next day. 'Those things' include the auction sale of Begum Salimah Aga Khan's jewellery by Christies in 1996, auction of the possessions of Jacqueline-Kennedy-Onassis in 1996, the sale of the belongings of Pamela Harriman, the former American Ambassador to France in 1997; auction of Princess Diana's dresses in New York in June 1997 and the February 1998 sale of the contents of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor's residence in Paris.

According to 'Demeures et Chateaux', "for an object to be an object of value, it should combine harmony with style, the quality of the work, the originality of the subject and the quality of the materials have to have more or less a degree of uniqueness, of rarity. The value of the object can also double or triple, etc. if it benefits from famous reminiscences, historical or sentimental." I had the privilege of witnessing the practice behind the theory.

When light meets matter, when colour transforms the image, when expression becomes impression, it is art.

A definition of art.

art

Guns and Roses : An Encounter with Abdullah Khalid

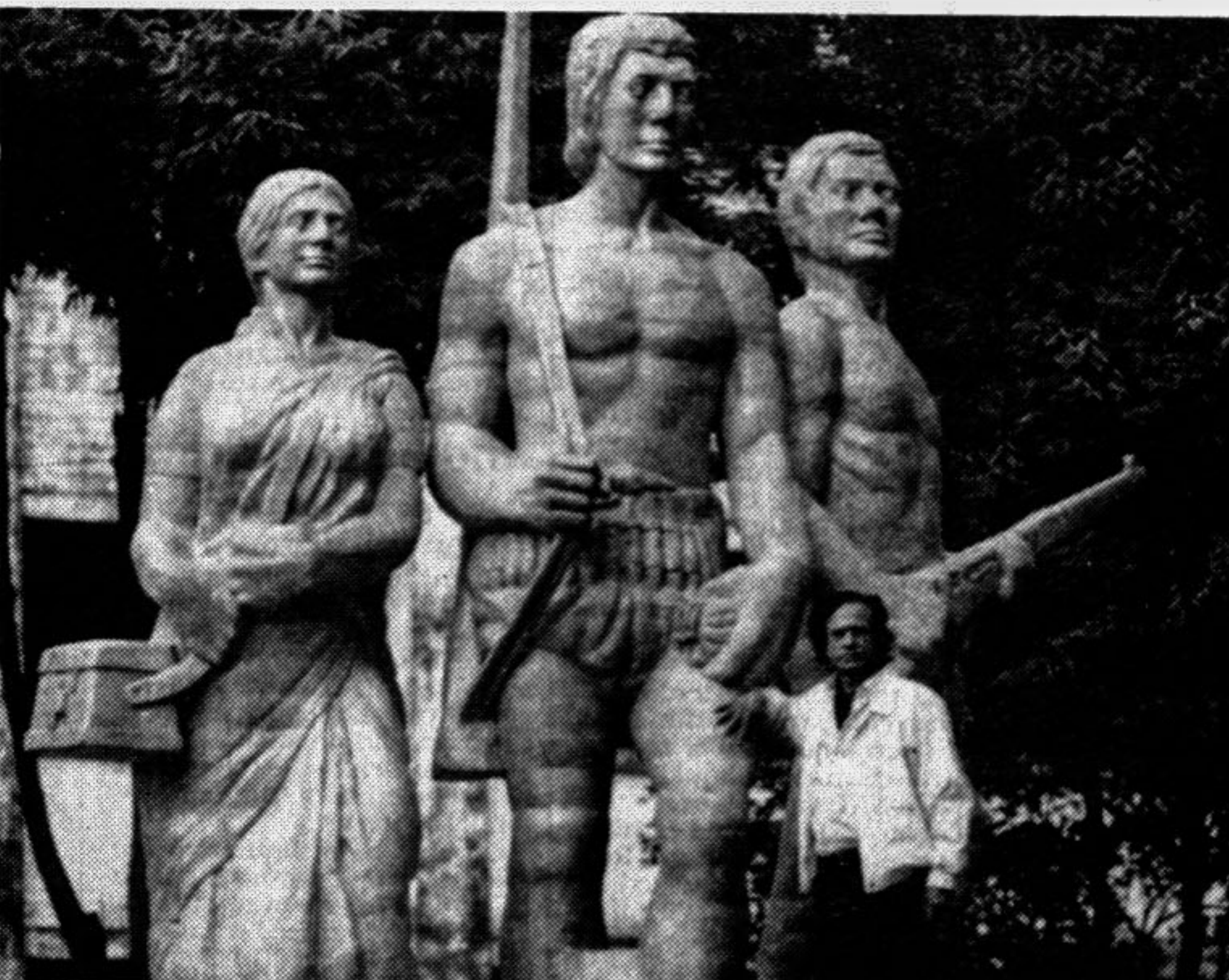
by Dr Firdous Murshid

I am not an art critic. It is therefore odd that I should take up the pen to write about Khalid. The answer lies in the 'roses' — actually flowers — and of such amazing hues and shapes that they simply dazzle and glow! His flowers take on a unique personality as it were, very much alive, pulsating, vivacious or alternatively weird, provocative or simply 'out of this world'. This is quite a transformation for Khalid, who is best known for his Aparajeyo Bangla that will remain an enduring tribute to our liberation war. While Aparajeyo Bangla is his most famous work (and one of the most monumental at 17' x 24' x 34') his obsession with our freedom struggle is also evident in a number of his other sculptural creations : Angkur (14' x 34' x 45') located at Tongi; Angikar (34' x 25' x 64') at Chandpur; the Shaheed Minar at Chittagong University amongst others.

The artist has travelled far from the 'guns' of war to his garden of roses, perhaps a symbolic journey undertaken to purge a sense of quiet guilt for not

directly engaging in battle in 1971, despite being a freedom fighter. The 'wages of sin' has been paid off through years of gruelling work with hammer and chisel to immortalise the war and its heroes. I guess his dues have now been paid. He can now afford to give vent to his spirit and let it soar. Time has mellowed his anger, although it can erupt in occasional fury at the most unexpected of times. His search for peace within and without will halt at least momentarily now that he has discovered his beloved flowers. How long will this infatuation last? Who knows — and does it matter?

I distinctly remember my first meeting with the artist. One of our 'famous' expatriate painters was in town and someone had thrown a party in his honour. I almost did not go. It was a noisy affair with men hugely outnumbering women (reminded me of the day-time parties of adolescence!). The Chief Guest was alone on the floor, grappling bravely if awkwardly, with the intricacies of the flamenco. Altogether, it was a bizarre sight. But at least the music was good. Someone pointed out Khalid to me — he appeared enraged —



Sculptor Syed Abdulla Khalid Photograph by Hossain Shahid Echo

perhaps a little jealous at the attention being heaped on the *bideshi*. As if to compete with him, he leaped on to the floor and launched into some rather frenzied gyrations. I thought someone muttered "mad"! Not an altogether flattering first encounter.

Months later I met Khalid at Gallery 21. This was a different Khalid: subdued, self-deprecating, humble. I put it all down to artistic eccentricity. Two of his flower paintings were on display at the gallery. I requested him to show me a few more and he complied. I don't think I have ever been affected by a painting in the same way as I have been affected by Khalid's flowers. I will not try to critique his works — I will leave that to the professionals. I will however say that it was an unforgettable experience. This is when I began to be interested in Khalid the man, the painter, the sculptor and master gardener! From quiet beginnings in Sylhet, initial attempts at school to make clay figurines and eventual enrolment at the Dhaka Art College, Khalid's early life was probably not much different from those of his peers. The liberation war clearly marks a

decisive turning point in his career. The problem of coming to terms with such a cataclysmic event, both as a citizen, a Bengali and an artist was complex — his sculptural works of the seventies and eighties are all symbols of that struggle. The ghost has finally been laid to rest, thanks to the flowers. If only the politicians would follow suit!

Listening to Khalid talk about his flowers is refreshing. He thinks he must have bought at least one lakh taka worth of flowers over the last one year — a lot of flowers indeed. He goes out every morning to buy from the freshest lot and manages to get hold of the rarest specimens of blue lotus or yellow rose. His room is chock full of every kind of floral arrangement. Even the bathroom has become a veritable garden. He will often paint all night or simply stay awake to 'talk' to his flowers — investing in them a kind of special aura, personality or character. He is working hard on his next painting exhibition, the second in his long career. I have no doubt that he will take the city by storm. Good luck Khalid.

Firdous Murshid is an economist, researcher and art enthusiast.

Dwelling on the Debris of Old Dhaka

by Fayza Haq

PHOTOGRAPHERS and film makers have done praiseworthy jobs of delineating Old Dhaka. Thirty-four year old Salahuddin has gone back to his old theme of Old Dhaka, which he knows and loves so well, in his sixth solo exhibition at the High Commission of India Cultural Centre Gallery.

Salahuddin, who has been painting since his school days, and had art as his hobby in his university days, had his first solo in '87. Getting encouragement from colleagues and buyers, he decided to put away his master's degree in International Relations and go in for painting with his entire mind and soul.

Although I have no formal training in painting, I do not feel inferior to my contemporaries in the field of art. This is because excellence in painting depends on practice. I have no regrets about having no academic education in art. My target is to paint my subject effectively which I think I'm doing well.

do read extensively all the books on art that I can lay my hands on but my focal point is my environment of Old Dhaka which is gradually crumbling.

"I'm dealing with a particular subject and in order to go into more depth I confine myself to it. I do not worry about the modern aspects of the metropolis, which is flourishing in any case. You can't rush and close the chapter of your theme in a couple of years. I want to delve deep into my theme, and present every facet of it to my viewers. There is a long history of Old Dhaka which is gradually getting abolished, forgotten and lost. Fifty years from now, my paintings may be there but the structures will have gone. I want to leave Old Dhaka as a symbol of the glory of our past."

Asked why he has not brought in old scenes such as the portrayal of silver smiths, the *shankha* (conch shell jewellers) workers, butchers etc. Salahuddin says, "My title of the paintings tell you that I am working with urban images. The structure of the buildings ap-

peal to me and so inspire me. The objects that you see in my work are often not to be found today. They have been decimated already. A lot of my work is from memory of the city of the 60s and 70s."

Dwelling on why he is doing semi-abstracts and how much the viewers will comprehend his work, Salahuddin says, "I've been working for ten years now. I expect my viewers to spend some time to contemplate and understand my work. I don't paint to please the connoisseurs or art viewers, as such. I work to express and please my inner drive, for instance, I don't include portraits for they have no appeal for me. My goal is to satisfy myself."

"My buyers include more foreigners than anybody else. I feel local buyers go in for more established artists — I cannot say if this involves any element of snobbery. Three out of five of my works, on average, are bought by my contacts through the embassies. I send them and the NGOs invitation and that works for me. I have liaison with art lovers on the

telephone and they buy from my house as well. Friends bring my patrons."

Speaking of why he does not work on realism or complete abstraction, and touching on his themes and techniques, Salahuddin elaborates further, "I am bored with realism. In future, I guess I will be more abstract. It is a development and not mere aping of the west. Semi-abstraction, with its repetitions may not please my mind and heart any more. I will give time to my viewers to be acquainted with and to comprehend pure abstraction in time. I don't want to be judged on a single solo. I expect my viewers to study the development in my style and to have rapport with my work. Galleries, art lovers, and frequency of exhibits have increased and I expect this turn in the art scenario will encourage painters like myself. Here the newsmen with their magazines and feature pages in both Bangla and English are another powerful prop that eggs on artists. When Monirul Islam and Salahuddin held their exhibition and got rave reviews this helped the

growth of interest in art. The Asian Biennale and the exhibition of foreign artists at Shilpangan also encouraged our work. The exhibit of foreign artists was admirable for a poor country like ours although I admit the second show was not as satisfactory as the news gave out to be. Maybe our sale is nothing to go over the moon about but at least we are getting back what we have invested."

Asked if the life of an artist is an easy one, Salahuddin replies, "It is certainly not a leisurely one. Yet I have no regrets over that. I feel if I enjoy a lot of facilities I will become lazy and insipid in my work. The need for money gives you a drive. Unless you have some amount of burning frustration within you, you cannot create with an impact. If I have a luxury penthouse, a car and such elements of comfortable life I will eat, drink, make merry, indulge in *ad-das* and achieve nothing. People consider us bohemians but what of it? That should not deter or hamper a painter. What the world thinks should not matter for a painter. I think frustration

leads to inspiration."

Asked to talk about the artists that inspired him, Salahuddin says, "I like Kibria, Monirul Islam, Shahabuddin, Md Eunus, Rafiqun Nabi, Mahmudul Huq, Abdul Baset, Abul Baresq Alvi among the male artists. As regards the woman painters, I admire Farida Zaman, Naima Huq, and Rokaya Sultana. Looking at their work spurs me on. At the Asian Biennale I liked the Australian work immensely. So also those from Syria, India and Palestine."

How does he feel about the works of the Bangladeshi painters at the recent Biennale: were they too similar and stereotyped as one senior artist once commented? To this Salahuddin replies, "Each artist is an individual. No two works of different painters can be the same. At the professional Biennale stage this is not possible."

Salahuddin has won three awards from USA, and has done two workshops in Dhaka. His success in the art world, despite of his lack of formal training, is remarkable indeed.