

column : *Parisien Portrait*

'The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties' by William Wiser

by Raana Haider

"A cheerfully informal account of the Franco-American bohemia that flourished between 1920 and 1930."
— The Spectator

THIS was Paris after the War — the Great War — should anyone doubt it. "The Great War was the longest adventure on the horizon, and Paris, its reconnaissance post, was the most beautiful city in the world. A passion for Paris often developed during this indoctrination tour in the besieged city, an ambulance driver's love at first sight would persist as a life time affair of the heart." Many a heart was broken in Paris — *finie l'affaire* — but not the affair with Paris. The American, William Wiser thus introduces us to 'The Crazy Years: Paris in the Twenties'. These were *Les Années Folles* (The Crazy Years).

The War decimated Europe and economies were in ruin. *Au contraire*, the economy of the United States of America flourished during 1914 to 1918 and in the early 1920s was the world's leading industrial power. "The critical downward spiral of the French franc was only another inducement that lured the first wave of Americans to Paris. The same day newspapers announced bread increase, 1 January 1920, the dollar stood at 26.76 francs — a single American greenback could purchase a month's supply of bread". (The franc today exchanges with the dollar at about 6 francs.) A combined environment of a low cost of living and an atmosphere of *laissez-faire* attracted droves of young Americans to Paris. They were drawn to the centre of creative energy which they also helped fuel. Paris was where 'it' was happening. It was 'the great good place.'

This was the Paris that attracted the American writer, James Joyce who came at the urging of a fellow American writer, Ezra Pound in the early 1920s for two weeks and stayed twenty years. He is not the first visitor to Paris to evolve into a resident. The word on-the-grapevine was "that Paris, eternally susceptible to the miracle of rejuvenation, was entering a new golden age." Joyce wrote his masterpiece 'Ulysses' in Paris at Boulevard Raspail. A frequent traveler to Paris from Barcelona, Pablo Picasso in the 1920s married Olga Khoklova, a dancer with the Ballets

Ernest Hemingway arrived in Paris in 1921. (See 'A Moveable Feast'). The formidable Gertrude Stein, another American-Parisian resident vetted all American literary hopefuls and *litterati* in Paris. An invitation to her salon was an acknowledgment of acceptance into the hallowed circle. Stein advised Hemingway who had started his literary career as a newspaper journalist in USA and Canada, that if he truly intended to be a writer, he would have to give up journalism. "If you keep on doing newspaper work, you will never see things, you will only see words and that will not do ..."

Russes at the Russian Orthodox Church in Paris. They honeymooned at the Hotel Lutetia whose elegant nineteenth century façade dominates Boulevard Raspail in the Montparnasse district of Paris. Joan Miro, the painter also from Barcelona was hopelessly enamoured by Paris. "This Paris has shaken me from hand to foot — in the good sense ... I am pierced to the marrow of my bones by all the sweetness her ... Never again Barcelona, that's flat ... Paris — to the day I die."

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Sylvia Beach opened Shakespeare and Company, a lending library of English books. A cornerstone of the Anglophone community in Paris, it continues to serve the Parisian English-speaking reader, "though possibly attracting a less celebrated roster of authors in a less celebrated literary age" writes Wiser. George Gershwin, the American composer of 'An American in Paris' was in and out of Paris in the 1920s. In the summer of 1927, flamboyant American dancer, Isadora Duncan drove along the celebrated Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Picking up speed, her long, trailing scarf got caught in one of the wheels of the car and her head snapped. Visitors made a beeline for Maxim's, Café de la Paix and Les Folies-Bergeres; all Parisians fixtures still at-

tracting the visiting crowds.

Charles Lindbergh made the first trans-Atlantic air-crossing in 1927. Armed with half-a-dozen sandwiches, he left Long Island remarking, "If get to Paris I won't need anymore, and if I don't get to Paris, I won't need anymore either." He made it to Paris and the dazed pilot asked, "Am I here? Is this really Paris?" Wildly-feted by Parisians and American-Parisians, Lindbergh was the most celebrated American-in-Paris of all time.

The Russian Revolution saw an exodus of Russian aristocratic *émigrés* to Paris. Lenin and Trotsky were in Paris at certain periods of their lives. However, post-1917 *émigrés* were aristocrats stripped of privileges and wealth. The only thing remaining to them were their titles. According to Wiser, "Grand dukes worked as headwaiters, czarist colonels became doormen (hoteliers thought the Russians wore their uniforms of braid and epaulettes with such distinction) and a great many became taxi-drivers ... It was thought *chic* to engage a fine lady-in-waiting to the Czarina as companion to a *nouveau-riche* dowager. Russian princesses were in demand as governesses ..." The mighty had fallen in Paris.

Two of the most famous Russian *émigrés* in Paris in the 1920s were the composers Sergei Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky. Stravinsky took to Paris like a duck to water. "Much about the west was compatible and stimulating to Stravinsky; life in Paris suited him and he became a French citizen," notes Wiser. On the other hand, "To settle in Paris does not mean that one immediately become Parisian," remarked Prokofiev. According to Wiser, "Prokofiev resisted becoming Parisian with all his Russian soul." The Russian tide included Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario who took the Ballets Russes to accolade and fame and was a prominent

feature of the music and dance scenario in Paris in the 1920s. In a moment of honest self-appraisal, Diaghilev described himself as, "I am a charlatan first of all but a charlatan with style. In the second place, I am a great charmer; and thirdly, I have no end of cheek." Wiser elaborates, "Neither musician, nor dancer, nor painter, nor businessman, Diaghilev managed to be all of them, a genius in bringing all the arts together on stage and in business substituting charm for money."

The 1920s saw the advent of a woman who was to become an icon of fashion, Coco Chanel. Born in rural poverty, she came to Paris and opened in 1922 a small millinery shop in one of the most distinguished areas of real estate in Paris near the Ritz Hotel in Place de la Vendôme and its well-to-do clientele. Observing the frills and fripperies of the ornate dress-of-the-day — Chanel promised, "That can't last. I'm going to dress them simply and in black ... Genius is the ability to foresee the future." So was born the quintessential 'little black dress' — the antithesis of the 'costume exotica' worn at the turn-of-the-century. She pursued in the severity of her design, *le luxe dans la simplicité* and ended with that famous "little plus" referred to by Georges Mikes in the 1950s in 'Little Cabbages' which sets apart *la mode Française*. Harriet Welty-Rochefort in 'French Toast: A Humorous Tour of What Living in France is Really Like' speaks of that same "little plus" in the 1990s. She writes, "So just what is that little *je ne sais quoi* that elevates simplicity into style, an art the French have mastered not just in clothing but in almost every detail of life? After about twenty years, I'm still trying to figure it out."

Coco Chanel's astute fashion and business sense led her to embark on dressing out simply *le beau monde* (the beautiful people) but *tout le monde* (all

the people). She introduced *haute couture* labels for mass-marketed items which was not quite the done thing. Another revolution in fashion design was the introduction of costume jewelry into the world of *haute couture*. Her legendary lengthy strands of fake pearls, set-off beautifully that 'little black dress.'

One cannot speak of Chanel without referring to that which has made her name since 1921 a byword for perfume — 'Chanel No. 5'. "Even the design for the flask was an inspiration: a simple square-edged bottle, plain in the way of a well-cut gem ... the label, 'Chanel No. 5' — in plain black letters on white — quietly announced itself a classic," remarks Wiser. So it remains to this day. 'Chanel No. 5' is the world's best selling fragrance. According to one report, every thirty seconds, there is one bottle of 'Chanel No. 5' being sold somewhere in the world.

Coco Chanel's small boutique and apartment at 31 Rue Cambon, behind the Ritz Hotel is the nucleus that since 1928, has developed into a multinational business. Chanel is today, the most powerful fashion firm in France. It is France's *premier* monument of style. All this is despite the death of its founder in 1971. German-born Karl Lagerfeld is the present head of the house of Chanel. Carole Bouquet, one of France's top actresses promotes Chanel products. Chanel jewelry launched its new shop at 18 Place de la Vendôme, the elegant square hosting the most exclusive and prestigious jewelers of the world in 1997, in close proximity to the founder's base at 31 Rue Cambon.

Another fragrance also launched in the 1920s by a French perfume house is Guerlain's 'Shalimar'. An ancestor of gourmand and classical perfumes, 'Shalimar' continues to be a bestseller with all generations — teenagers, their mothers and their grandmothers. Once

again, Guerlain has successfully projected a French traditional image of luxury and sophistication but also a familiar world of simple pleasures and casual sensuality. The first perfume I bought this time in Paris was 'Champs-Elysees' by Guerlain from their elegant outlet on Les Champs-Elysees, almost adjacent to the perfume emporium, Sephora. (See 'Homage to Perfume'). Guerlain products may only be bought from Guerlain boutiques. It seemed the right thing to do — to start with 'Champs Elysees' — as I inaugurated my purchase of perfumes in Paris.

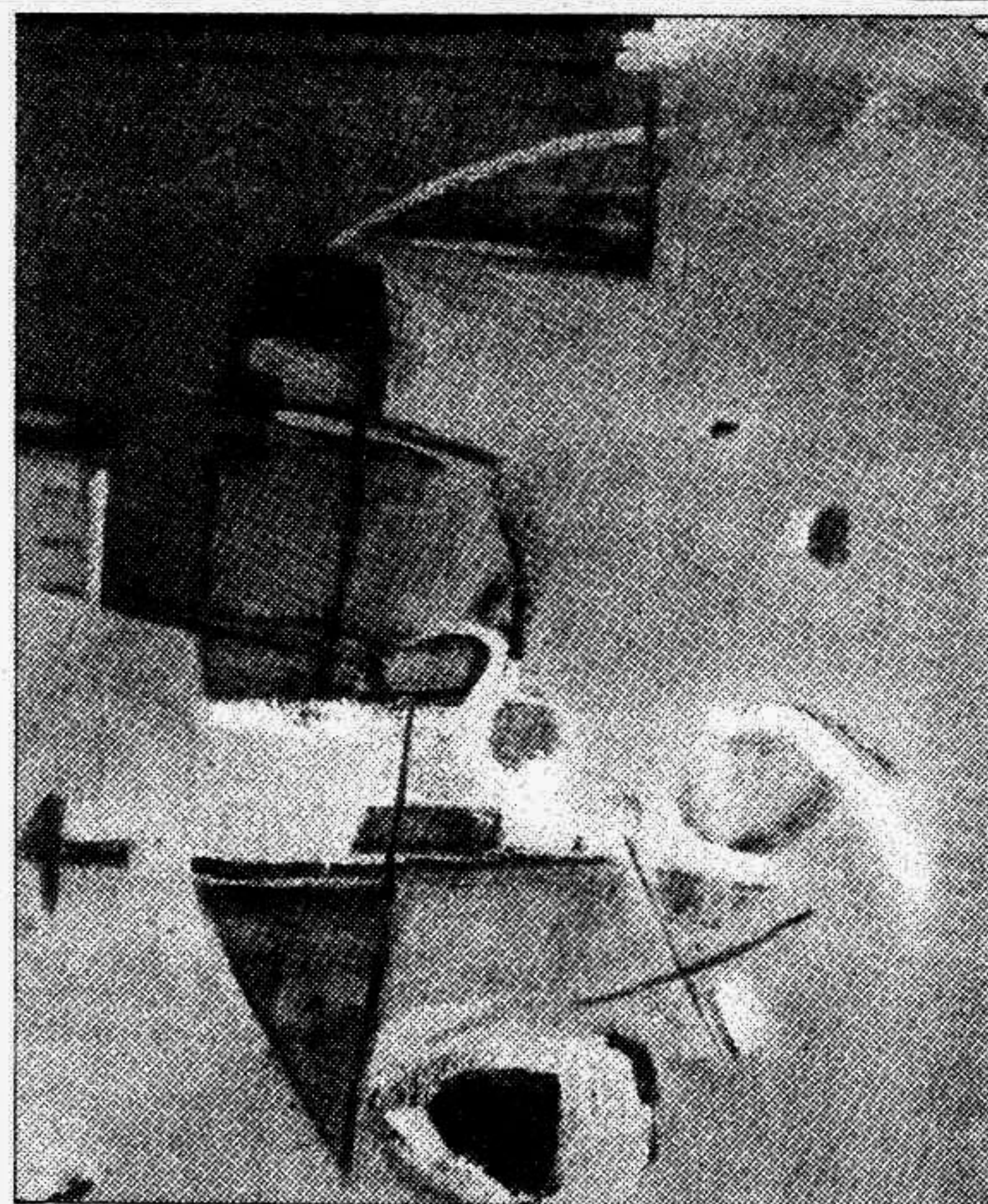
The post-First World War convergence of expatriates to Paris trickled downwards at the close of the 1920s. The American Depression of the 1930s was on the horizon and rendered insolvent many of the American residents in Paris. This wave of 'the great good life' was coming to an end. Harold Stearns, an American journalist with the Chicago Tribune in Paris, decided to return home. "It was a useless silly life," he declared of his Paris sojourn, "and I have missed it every day since."

"The memory of each person who has lived in Paris differs from that of any other," wrote Ernest Hemingway. William Wiser's Paris is thus also unique. He first came to Paris in 1960 and today lives in the French Riviera. Revisiting the sights and places of Paris in the 1920s, Wiser writes, "A connecting thread does run through everyman's Paris; there are prototypes, touchstones: the eternal *café*, the central bridges (except for the sadly missing pont des Arts), a gray changeable coloring like no other, smells and sounds, a mood due as much to the city as one's self, an alternating low fever and sometimes depression broken by sudden and unexpected delight ... Together we mourn the changes that disrupt our shared philosophy, knowing that the changes are what keep Paris alive."

The English actor, Robert Morley wrote in 'A Musing Morley, France and the French' that, "The French are a logical people, which is one reason the English dislike them so intensely. The other is that they own France, a country which we have always judged to be much too good for them." This must be the single explanation for the attraction that is France to all non-French people.



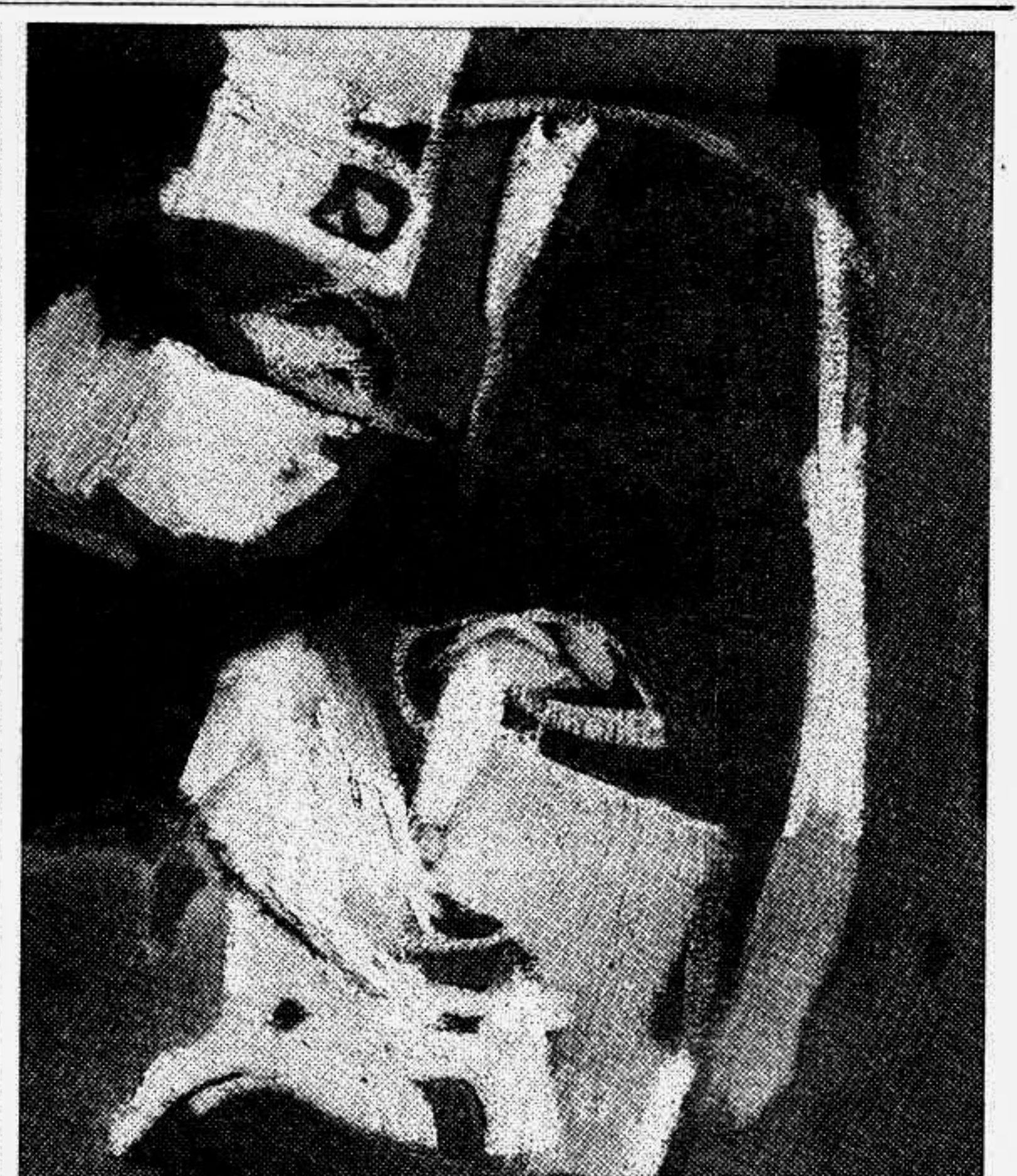
Painting-1



Painting-4



Painting-5



Painting-6

art Mahmudul Haque's paintings

by Syed Manzoorul Islam

WHEN Mahmudul Haque first began to work with abstractions, and was attracted by the immense possibilities the style offered, he found himself, not very reluctantly as he now admits, under the influence of Kibria. For those who wanted to record the fluid and intangible nature of their experience in lines and form and paint that captured the essential nuances without altering the substantial nature of the content, Kibria's work had become almost a model to study. With his colour-scheme and vivid texture and profound depth of the canvas where forms rose like patterns from the subconscious, Kibria inspired Mahmudul Haque to explore the rich and symbolic world of colour, study the protean nature of forms and understand the aesthetics of geometry. Mahmudul Haque's early works are therefore exploratory, they show a constantly enlarging dialectics between the artist and his world that reveals, at a deeper level, the artist's restless

search for a personal expression and a personal idiom. By 1980, when he went to Japan, Mahmudul Haque had started to drift away from his mentor, creating his own signified surfaces of intricate texture with interlocking forms that breathe a sense of speed, and a colour perception that reveals the potentials of contrasted statements and overlapping techniques. His visit to Japan was an eye opener, as it brought him in close contact with a tradition that gives emphasis on the inner dynamism of the form and on the boldness of presentation; avoids artificiality (which quickly degenerate into facetiousness or even redundancy) and valorizes clarity. That clarity is not of the content — for content is something that experience reconstructs anew with each encounter with the work — but something that lies in the perception that makes the art work happen in the first place. Mahmudul Haque's formal training there was in print and graphics, and he picked up, along with the techniques,

a sensibility that accommodated minute details and subtle nuances within a grand sweep of vision. Mahmudul Haque's search for an individual expressive mode took him through different phases and stylistic ranges. He experimented with colour-schemes, with chaotic forms, incisive lines that cut a surface like a knife, or space that opened on emptiness that is symptomatic of life's emptiness. His works were records of his responses to the varied demands of life and reality. Sometimes those responses took an imagistic dimension — the composition assumed a lyricism that narrated a particular experience; sometimes his canvas would open up to further interpretations. Mahmudul Haque made a series of compositions to accommodate a vision whose components were inter-linked and interactive: Foliage, Patch, Stone on Stone, The Goal of Humanity and, lastly, Rain. In some of these inter-linked compositions, a leading pattern like a foliage composition would pro-

vide an epiphanic impress from which a multitude of other compositions would open up; in others, a philosophical realization would lead the artist to explore the dimensions of the human scene; but Mahmudul Haque made each of his compositions a separate aesthetic construct. The underlying concerns that related each of them is easy to understand, but after a while, we realize this commonness is actually another name for the artistic unity Mahmudul Haque is striving to attain. In Rain, he evoked a mood, and each composition in that series is a fresh reading and a different interpretation of that mood. The mood is enhanced by colour which in the predominant use of soft shades and subdued tonalities, inaugurates a new phase in Mahmudul Haque's creativity.

His most recent exhibition brought together a number of compositions in oil with no titles (only numerical identity tags) brings to the fore Mahmudul Haque's superior sense of colour, his dynamic perception of form and his

control of his material. Green, blue, purple, red and their different shades predominate — once again the artist is emphasizing on the mood, on the evocation of feeling. The forms often interlock, cut across each other; but they dance, they grow from within. The use of pink or purple contributes to some of the composition a sense of euphoria that infuses a life in the form. We realize that Mahmudul Haque is actually presenting a new interpretation of life — not life as it is, but they way he would like it to be. Some of the canvasses have large areas near their margins left blank, or applied with a very light shade — this emptiness around the edges highlights the contents and concentrates our attention on the paint area. But the paint area often creates a feeling of diffusiveness, of fluidity, and forces us to readjust our focus on reality. We realize that behind its rigid countenance, life has a lightness of being that may be ignored but not suppressed. Mahmudul Haque's early lyricism is

rejuvenated in these paintings, the expansiveness of vision that characterized the Goal of Humanity or Rain is also here. But one feels that the artist has a more intense involvement with his vision and his material in this latest exposition and makes a more concerted attempt to order his encounters with reality.

Some of the paintings appear to have been done with speed and without the usual care the artist gives to his composition; and the result is that the paints and the texture do not assume their proper dimensions. Sometimes a hasty brush stroke contrasts with a more leisurely prepared paint area, and the effect — not intended, anyway — is a bit confusing. But these are minor details one could easily overlook. In this latest exhibition, Mahmudul Haque has opened his canvas to a more direct and intense involvement with life. The images that he paints are optimistic — therefore worth our while to get to know them a little more intimately.